

# Political Revelations in Detail: The Close-Up in Patricio Guzmán's *The Battle of Chile*

By Stephen N. Borunda

Allow me to begin with a brief exegesis of the faces captured at a meeting of a Chilean Trade Union Council in *The Battle of Chile: Part II: The Coup d'État* (*El golpe de estado*, 1976), the second part in Patricio Guzmán's documentary trilogy *The Battle of Chile* (*La batalla de Chile*, 1975-1979). At this meeting, Guzmán relies significantly upon close-ups. Haptic in nature, the close-ups in his film often emphasize the corporeal and its accompaniments. In this particular scene, cinematographer Jorge Müller Silva first captures a council representative in close-up. The unnamed representative's visage is mustached, calm, and calculated (Figure 1). Pleading for patience from the workers calling for the nationalization of more Chilean industries, the representative is also unwilling to acquiesce to the crowd's calls for violence against the right-wing elements of the country. Ultimately, another worker in the crowd can no longer stay silent; he delivers an impassioned plea for Chilean President Salvador Allende, the first democratically elected socialist president in world history, to trust the country's workers. In such proximity to the camera, the worker's passion is evident through the creases on his face, while his hands gesticulate with great energy to amplify and promulgate his nearly fatidic ideas about the possibility of a *coup d'état* against Allende's socialist government. The audience composed of fellow workers erupts into applause. Staking his claim on the meeting, this worker has shifted the tone of the entire gathering and asserted the presence of a group and a will that, up until that point in the scene, had not yet been so convincingly represented. Modern film and political theory understand such moments of expression, the fracture of normality by silenced groups, as political. This understanding of politics is obviously quite different from the traditional definitions that revolve around elections, representatives, and governmental bodies.

While film academics have analyzed Guzmán's oeuvre from a variety of perspectives, including the utilization of memory (Cisneros, 2006) and ruins (Rodríguez, 2013; Murphy, 2016), in this article I seek to argue *a posteriori* that

## KEYWORDS

*politics*  
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*Chile*  
*Patricio Guzmán*  
*documentary*  
*Unidad Popular*

Figure 1. *The Battle of Chile:  
Part II: The Coup d'État*  
(Icarus Films, 1976)



the close-ups in *The Battle of Chile* allow the Chilean alliance of *Unidad Popular* (Popular Unity) to claim domain for itself in a political act as a consequence of Guzmán's triumvirate of documentary filmmaking. His three-part documentary includes *Part I: The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie* (*La insurrección de la burguesía*, 1975), *Part II: The Coup d'État*, and *Part III: Popular Power* (*El poder popular*, 1979). As my hermeneutics, I primarily utilize Laura Marks and Jacques Rancière's explications of the political as an expression from the silenced.

To gain a brief historical context for the film, we should note that the growth of progressive movements in Chile during the 1960s and the 1970s was an attempt by assemblages of underrepresented groups to have their voices heard by the government. According to Constable and Valenzuela's *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet*, substantial numbers of laborers, progressives, socialists, and the impoverished amongst others joined the political alliance of *Unidad Popular* to increase their political power (24). In 1970, their efforts resulted in the election of President Salvador Allende (Constable and Valenzuela 24). This progressive movement would be fissured and then oppressed by the military *junta* after the CIA-sponsored coup of 1973 in Chile that would result in President Allende's suicide. Shortly thereafter, General Augusto Pinochet ensured that "military rule became entrenched" as he seized power in the country, eventually becoming a military president (Constable and Valenzuela 62). Military leaders labeled members of *Unidad Popular* as "rats"; the "army snatched up [members of *Unidad Popular*] and [they] vanished" and "left behind . . . families who were helpless to intervene and frantic to find out where their loved ones had been taken" (Constable and Valenzuela 20, 99). At the risk of stating a tautology, *Unidad Popular* found itself, for all intents and purposes, silenced.

*The Battle of Chile* is considered one of the earliest examples of Third Cinema – a filmmaking style grounded in social transformation – which was articulated by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (Wayne 3). The latter of these theorists wrote that this movement worked to articulate a "new film language capable of expressing our social reality" (Getino 106). I do not wish to contend that Guzmán's film is a visual cryptogram that needs to be overanalyzed, but instead that the cinematographic technique of the close-up within this documentary is political due to its ability to give form to absence and voice to the voiceless and their true reality. Thus, the film itself becomes more than just political documentation and, perhaps, becomes a political act itself. After all, Guzmán's usage of close-ups in *The Battle of Chile* is a cinematic means through which Pinochet's efforts might be challenged because the close-up creates and proliferates political interstices of *Unidad Popular* in the gaze of the spectator. After I clarify my definition of political cinema, I outline how the close-up uses a polyvocal method to reveal *Unidad Popular*: first, the close-up promulgates a sense of equality between people in the turbulent Chilean society of the 1970s; second, the close-up provides tactility to *Unidad Popular*; finally, the close-up also reveals the opposition's deceit that would lead to Pinochet's dictatorship. In my final section, I briefly describe how we might further explore the relationship between the close-up and politics.

## Marks, Rancière, and Politics in Film

Political films are more than just the visual documentation or the fictional depiction of events that relate to the government in some way. Indeed, from theorists such as Fernando Birri, we understand that cinema cannot just be a popular medium as this variety of cinema "presents no real image of . . .

people at all, but conceals them” (Birri 93, 94). Instead, for Birri, cinema must unveil truth; cinema must reveal people (Birri 93). In *The Skin of the Film*, Marks articulates that political films are found at sites of “collective emergence.” Political cinema is where “temporary nodes of struggles” exist and “people are just beginning to find their voices” (Marks 55). Thus, wherever previously silenced people force others to see and recognize them through film, an example of political cinema has emerged. Where there previously were “gaps and silences,” society now recognizes the form of a group beginning to emerge (Marks 56). Political cinema is then comprised of a group materializing and expressing itself in film despite antagonistic governmental or social forces.

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Marks’s understanding of political cinema aligns with how modern political theorists such as Rancière define politics, as both understandings emphasize a sensory disruption by those previously ignored. Politics, for Rancière, is a polemical dialogue where bodies speak and challenge what is held to be normal or “sensible” (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 7). Governmental institutions and decisions do not circumscribe politics, but rather politics function as fractures to the “sensible” by the abnormal, the unrecognized, and the oppressed. Breaks in the “natural order of domination . . . by those who have no part” (civil rights groups, impoverished people, women, people of color, people with unique gender expressions or preferences, etc.) constitute political acts (*Disagreement* 11).

The close-up draws us close and perhaps best allows spectators to perceive those subjects previously unnoticed. Hugo Münsterberg delineates that the close-up causes us to “withdraw our attention from all which is unimportant and concentrate it on *one point* on which the action is focused . . .” (Münsterberg 14). While the motley and overwhelming details of the physical world on-screen might facilitate the erasure of specific individuals, the close-up’s singular focus can reveal those that may have otherwise been forgotten.

## Equality via Physiognomy

Through the frame’s central focus on the visage during interviews and the frame’s corresponding lack of focus on contextual factors, *The Battle of Chile* promotes a degree of egalitarianism – no matter the political affiliation or status – between the subjects of the film in the eyes of spectators. Conservatives and liberals, union leaders and members, and party leaders and party members are all given equal attention and “focus” in the close-up. According to Béla Balázs, “Facing an isolated face takes us out of space . . . we find ourselves in another dimension: that of physiognomy” (“The Face of Man” 131). The close-up’s deprivation of contextual space and shallow depth of field frequently leaves the spectator with only the visage to evaluate, as the power of mise-en-scene dissipates in such shots. Guzmán claims that his documentary purposefully vacillates between “the actions visible on the left and the actions visible on the right,” and this usage of the close-up for all factions involved gives spectators only faces to evaluate in many instances (Guzmán 40). The close-up then is a leveling cinematographic tool for Guzmán’s work, as it allows him to display

Figure 2. *The Battle of Chile: Part I: The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie* (Icarus Films, 1975)

Figure 3. *The Battle of Chile: Part II: The Coup d'État* (Icarus Films, 1976)



Figures 4 and 5. *The Battle of Chile: Part I: The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie* (Icarus Films, 1975)



actors on the right and left. Thus, Unidad Popular is shown as a movement of equal importance and legitimacy to any other – contrary to Pinochet’s later actions and words.

Consider *The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie*’s commencing moments during which Guzmán interviews Chileans of all positions on the political spectrum about the upcoming Congressional elections. The camera oscillates between wide shots of crowds and close-ups on subjects. As a testament to the importance of the close-up in the documentary, within just the first six minutes of the documentary, the camera lingers in close proximity on the faces of about twenty different subjects. Guzmán’s team interviews individuals ranging from devout members of Unidad Popular to optimistic supporters of the nationalist *Partido Nacional* (National Party), and even apathetic voters. One virago lurches her face so quickly and pejoratively toward the camera that it, in close-up, struggles to keep her in focus (Figure 2). Sunglasses cover her eyes as she expresses her derision for the Allende government and she ululates, “[w]e’ll get rid of those rotten Marxist communists.” The antipode of this interview comes just moments later, when a middle-aged man seated at a Unidad Popular rally expresses the disdain shared by the crowd behind him for those seeking to sabotage the socialist government. As the crowd chants for “power to the workers,” the man shares, “I say Popular Unity will win. And to hell with the ‘mummies’ on the right . . . the ‘mummies’ can drop dead!” Regardless of the opinions of both of these individuals, the close-up dexterously conveys the outrage of both sides of the political spectrum and, in that manner, provides a sort of egalitarianism of people, political persuasions, and emotions.

Additionally, the documentary exposes Unidad Popular by revealing the political alliance’s internal structure as grounded in equality. The close-up challenges lines of division between those on differing levels of the formal leadership hierarchy within Unidad Popular. Particular close-ups show all members as equals operating in a nexus. For instance, in *Popular Power*, bucolic union members scold a government bureaucrat for his ineffective leadership. While the union members speak, the bureaucrat’s head is down, and his foot nervously sweeps across the ground. Eventually, he claims to have put “trust” in the wrong people. The camera first moves toward him into a close-up and then pans to observe the crowd’s stoic reactions in response to this governmental bureaucrat’s admission of his errors. The camera’s movement helps to place labor leaders and workers on equal levels at this moment.

While the motley and overwhelming details of the physical world on-screen might facilitate the erasure of specific individuals, the close-up’s singular focus can reveal those that may have otherwise been forgotten.

The documentary even defies the typical lines between actors and audiences in formal settings. In *The Coup d’État*, President Allende condemns recent street posters that promote the overthrow of the government (Figure 3). Instead of focusing solely on Allende and providing him with preeminence during his speech, the camera voyages around the room and provides close-ups of the solemn faces of the members of Unidad Popular. Guzmán even opts to keep a shot of Allende’s determined countenance during which a member of the party in the crowd steps into the foreground of the shot. The close-up then becomes momentarily attached to this man in the crowd. Such an editing decision implies

that this moment did not belong just to the speaker but all of Unidad Popular's members, unified in a justified concern for the survival of the government and its constituents. Guzmán's usage of the close-ups on visages provides the same treatment to political parties on the right and left, laborers and union leaders, and spectators and speakers. This egalitarianism of visuals in the documentary suggests that Unidad Popular was as viable and valid as any movement prior to its dismantling and persecution by the state.

## Tactility of a Movement

The close-up, by its very idiosyncratic nature of being close, moves the spectator toward a more haptic understanding of the camera's subject. Jean Epstein's delineation of the influence of the close-up on the spectator is: "The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity . . . If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears" (Epstein 13). Accordingly, films and their cinematographic techniques – such as the close-up – can put us into a form of "pseudo-physical" contact with those groups on the screen.

To build on the idea of the exploration of the face explored in the preceding section, the face through its external subtleties and cues can reveal the internal thoughts that compose its subject. One of the earliest shots in *The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie* is a close-up of a former vagrant who had lived – until recently – in exiguity. At one point, the camera is so close to her face that most of the screen is only composed of the area around her nose and teeth. As she recollects how her old shack was perpetually damp and her children would continuously fall into illness, tears swell in her eyes. In this emotional sequence, the woman's repose falters as her gratitude toward President Allende is manifested on camera. Her residence – granted to her by governmental programs – is, in her mind, "beautiful." The decision to place us in such tight proximity reveals her appreciation, pain, and devotion to the President as told by the creases on her face, the tears in her eyes.

Pinochet's polemic and his violent actions asserted that the movement of Unidad Popular was a movement by no one toward nothing; members of Unidad Popular were nonentities and, thus, could be deprived of rights, as no rights were theirs to have.

However, Guzmán also embraces this sensuality in his usage of close-ups to provide spectators with the means to understand Unidad Popular through the other corporeal aspects of the flesh shown in close-up. In *The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie*, a miner in support of Unidad Popular correctly predicts the impending insurrection against the socialist government: "We believe that one election more or less won't solve the problem and avoid the civil war. The civil war is inevitable and fundamental." As he shares his thoughts, we see close-ups of his hands and the hands of fellow miners (Figure 4). The miner speaking gesticulates his hands; a neighboring miner holds a cigarette while another folds his hands. The absence of possession is what matters here. These workers have nothing with which to protect themselves should a civil war come since the government had previously disarmed many Chileans. Due to the political extremism of the time, Allende and the Chilean Congress approved gun laws in

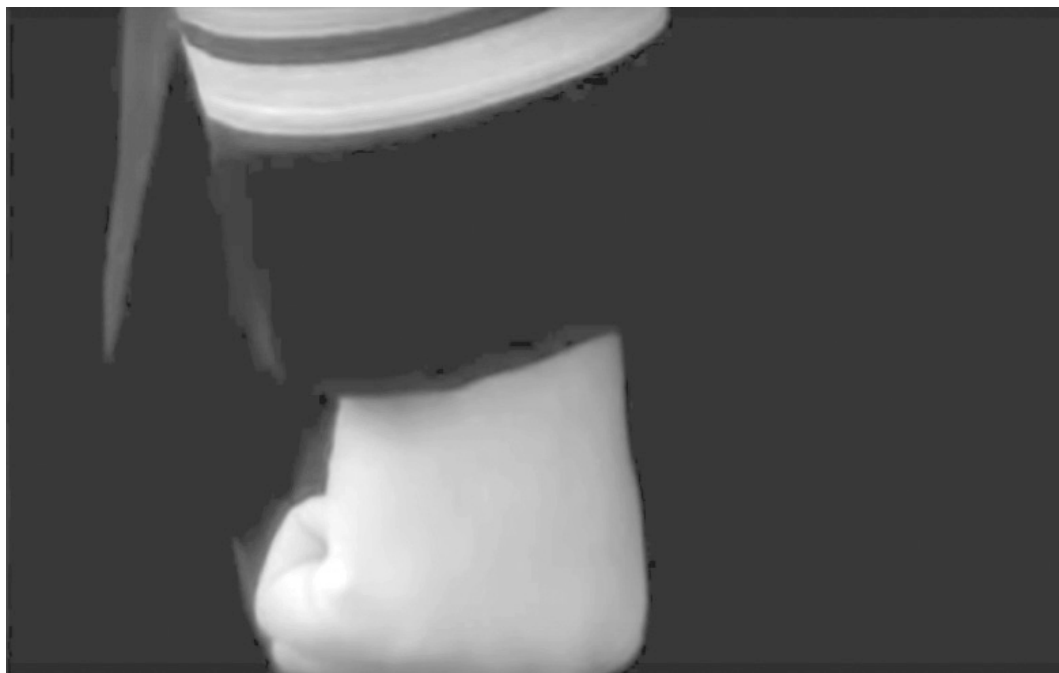


Figure 6. *The Battle of Chile: Part II: The Coup d'État* (Icarus Films, 1976)



Figure 7. *The Battle of Chile: Part II: The Coup d'État* (Icarus Films, 1976)

Figure 8. *The Battle of Chile: Part III: Popular Power* (Icarus Films, 1979)



The close-ups in Guzmán's three-part film visually challenge Pinochet's attempts to turn the social space occupied by Unidad Popular's into a lacuna.

1972 that “restrict[ed] the ownership of automatic weapons to only the armed forces and *Carabineros*, and also gave the military the right to search for (and confiscate) firearms found in public hands” (Collier and Sater 349). These sorts of ephemeral shots of hands or body parts in proximity to the camera reveal to the spectator what tools of protection Unidad Popular lacked and how they would be unprotected when the military would take action.

Close-ups even connect the haptic nature of Unidad Popular intimately to production. No matter the strikes occurring in the country, the film follows the social vinculum between Unidad Popular and labor. In the second part of the documentary, *Popular Power*, organizations of workers vow to continue their quotidian labor duties during food shortages. In one scene, a carpenter claims that the laborers will “[produce] more to [help] the President” (Figure 5). However, while this carpenter speaks, the camera's focus settles on the background, where three other carpenters are working. The foreground in close-up, composed of the carpenter's face, is out of focus while his fellow workers are sharp. The emphasis of the camera on labor is crucial as, in this shot, the individual worker lacks significance; instead, the transmutation of the plurality into a single body of laboring workers is what Guzmán wants his audience to behold. The haptic nature of such close-ups and their corporeal tendencies in such moments solidify the fortitude of Unidad Popular. We can connect to its subjects even more strongly due to the camera's ability to let us “touch” and, consequently, better understand.

## Deception by the Protectors

Journalist Bruce Chatwin, in his semi-fictional book *In Patagonia*, recounts his journeys in the south of Chile and Argentina. Chatwin devotes several pages to the Chilean sect of the Brujería and the sect's magical powers, maleficent deeds, disturbing initiation processes, and their supposedly rancorous culture. However, as Chatwin concludes his writing on the sect, he asserts, “[i]t is equally plausible that Man became Man through fierce opposition to the sect” (110). When humans attempt to demarcate themselves in opposition to another “menacing” group, they inherently cede the existence and power of those “others” over themselves. Interpersonal relations and forces – even antagonistic ones – inherently admit the presence and authority of another comparable force. Guzmán uses various close-ups in *The Battle of Chile* to delineate the deception and betrayal of Allende's Unidad Popular government by social and military factions. However, these factions' inimical actions and fears ironically demonstrate the capacity of Unidad Popular as a movement. After all, the military would not have needed to squash that which didn't pose any true threat. Guzmán's close-ups function as political on this level since Unidad Popular is subtly revealed through the way in which their opposition deceitfully responds.

The close-up “reveal[s] . . . the hidden mainsprings of life which we thought we already knew so well . . . Close-ups are often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surfaces of appearances,” claims Balázs (“The Close-Up” 129). The close-up undermines what appears to be through the camera's depiction of what actually is. In the first film of the trilogy, Guzmán presents close-ups of the helmets, shields, and flags of a paramilitary force called “Fatherland and Freedom” marching in the streets of Santiago. The group's

ideogram adorns nearly all of these items. The nationalist group's chants are for "freedom" and unity, but close-ups of these violent objects and symbols reveal an actual cry for violence against the government, as the democratic means of stifling the power of Unidad Popular had already failed. After all, the elections captured in the first part of the documentary show us that Unidad Popular had only increased in widespread support at the polls during Allende's time in office.

Guzmán supplements these sorts of moments of tension between Unidad Popular and these right-wing factions in *The Coup d'État* by also subtly revealing that distrust for the military is indeed beginning to foment amongst the population. During an interview, a balding elderly man asserts with equanimity that Allende's handpicked military leadership has the trust of the public as "of course, they're with the people now." However, as this man is speaking, the camera pans over to allow spectators to see the face of a neighboring man in close-up (Figure 6); this man's torvous expression has eyes filled with both fear and tears, suggesting that the faith of some people in military leadership has begun to erode.

Such lines of deceit are furthered when we consider how Balázs declares that the close-up even shows "dumb objects that live with you . . . and whose fate is bound up with your own . . ." because "what makes objects expressive are the human expressions projected on them" ("The Close-Up" 129, 130). Effectively, objects on-screen can have significance because of the meaning the audience can assign them. In *The Coup d'État*, we watch a military cortege for Allende's aide-de-camp Arturo Araya Peeters following his assassination. The camera, in close-up, moves past the crowd of military men. Black suits, dark ties, gloves, military hats, and a litany of other expressions of heraldry flood the screen in close-up during this sepulchral procession (Figure 7). With their uniform similarities, the soldiers themselves become a monadic military body in the eyes of the spectator. The military leaders are no longer atomized but a single entity. These close-ups on items that are supposed to symbolize national pride and honor instead presage the military's actions that we know are to come; these "leaders" of Chile would soon betray it. The close-up verifies the vigor of the voice of Unidad Popular by portending the extent of the treachery by the military and other social forces to silence this progressive movement.

## Past Lacunae and Future Emancipations

Through equality, tactility, and deception, these multifaceted expressions of Unidad Popular in close-up in *The Battle of Chile* become of particular importance when we consider first, Pinochet's later attempts to obliterate the movement, and second, what the denouement of the documentary seeks to say to audiences. In a televised broadcast subsequent to the besiegement of the presidential palace called *La Moneda*, featured in *The Coup d'État*, Augusto Pinochet abjures his previous support of Unidad Popular and President Allende. Pinochet elucidates, "The armed forces [that led the coup] have acted...solely from the patriotic inspiration of saving the country from the tremendous *chaos* into which it was being plunged by the Marxist government of Salvador Allende." The word "chaos" comes from the Greek word *khaos*, denoting an "abyss" or "infinite darkness" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In other words, "chaos" is an essence devoid of form. In Plato's *Timaeus*, Plato's narrator recounts that at the origin of time there was "no homogeneity or balance... no...equilibrium" but only this chaos. The demiurge had to then create order in the universe (Plato 44). Pinochet, knowingly or not, darkly repurposed this

genesis narrative as his regime attempted to eradicate this “chaos” – composed primarily of members of Unidad Popular – with the state police (the DINA) in order to save the country and create order. The results of this social conflagration would result in at least 3,095 deaths over the next two decades (*The Guardian*). Pinochet’s polemic and his violent actions asserted that the movement of Unidad Popular was a movement by no one toward nothing; members of Unidad Popular were nonentities and, thus, could be deprived of rights, as no rights were theirs to have.

The close-ups in Guzmán’s three-part film visually challenge Pinochet’s attempts to turn the social space occupied by Unidad Popular’s into a lacuna. Instead, the film, in part, manifests Unidad Popular via the close-up’s revelatory powers of equality, tactility, and its unmasking of the betrayal that would impact the government. Through these facets of the close-up, Guzmán’s film becomes more than political documentation because it reassembles Unidad Popular and provides the opportunity for spectators to observe the movement tangible and enlarged.

The third part of the documentary even engages these spectators as the film concludes with the call from Guzmán: “We’ll keep on going, comrade . . . We’ll be seeing you.” Another worker then responds with the peroration that those oppressed will triumph, “[w]e have to make it, it’s now or never.” A wide shot of the Atacama Desert fills the screen as the camera continues to pull back (Figure 8), implying that the journey toward true justice is long and desolate. Despite the literal obliteration of Unidad Popular at the film’s coda, Guzmán’s work has the potential to catalyze change through his portrayal of their acts. It was André Bazin who claimed, “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation” (Bazin 9). The work of what we might term “close embalming” by Patricio Guzmán in his usage of the close-up in his documentary provides both Chileans and the international community with a tool of the utmost importance for cosmopolitan remembrance of historical oppression and the Chilean people that the film reveals.

Cinematographic decisions – decisions of proximity and revelation – are choices made by the film’s director about who is and who is not of importance. Through the close-up, Guzmán’s work inspires us to remember those marginalized but ultimately not silenced by Pinochet’s regime. The close-up enlightens and disrupts systems of oppressions by showing the presence and importance of those considered “others.” If we use this particular example in Chile cinema of “close embalming” as a starting point, there might be other areas – which go far beyond the scope of this piece – to be explored about the connection between camera angles and the political unveiling of people. In particular, in this day of social media and media that can be shared at the touch of a button, *who* is shown and *how* seems to be of special importance. Might civil rights movements be able to gain more traction based upon the camera angles in documentary pieces or narrative films with social bents? Such questions remain ones worthy to be explored by future media scholars.



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### DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW

The political science department at **Johns Hopkins University** is designed to help students attain a deeper understanding of politics in its various dimensions. The department encourages students to become sophisticated theoretically and to study politics in global and comparative perspectives. Students can focus on American politics, law and politics, comparative politics, international relations, and political theory.

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