

Through six semesters as an instructor of record, in addition to earlier work as a recitation leader, I have developed a teaching philosophy that emphasizes multiple techniques, a collaborative and mutually respectful classroom environment, and a focus on the benefits students can gain from the study of political science. In this statement, I provide concrete examples of how I have approached teaching over the past several years. I have received consistently high student evaluations in my courses, and intend to continue developing my teaching philosophy through experience. I am prepared to teach introductory courses in comparative politics, European politics, and international relations, in addition to courses on democratization, authoritarian politics, election manipulation, and the politics of Russia and the former Soviet Union.

I design my courses using the principle of backwards design, in which instructors build their courses around the goals they have for students in the class: what big questions should they be able to answer, and what skills should they be able to demonstrate (Wiggins et al., 2005)? In general, I design courses so that students will come away with three benefits. First, exposure to political science should equip them with a vocabulary for describing the political world. Second, they should be able to use those concepts in an analytical way, relying on argument and evidence to explain political outcomes. Finally, they should have opportunities to develop skills that are broadly applicable for life and career: clear analytical writing, testing ideas in discussion with peers, and public speaking, among others. I structure my courses to offer students all three of these benefits, and aim to make the class useful for all students, including die-hard politics fans and those simply fulfilling a requirement.

During class, I combine periods of lecture with periods of active learning—including discussions, exercises, and simulations—to create an environment where students can approach the same material in different ways (Nilson, 2010). When lecturing, my goal is to equip students with the main concepts of the day, so that they can apply them in the rest of the session. As a result, I put special emphasis on relevant examples from current events, well-known historical examples, or campus issues. For example, in my European politics courses, a lecture on right-wing populism leads into an activity where students read and discuss the party program of the AfD, a German far-right party. We then consider how the party’s rhetoric compares to populist rhetoric in the United States, and what might account for these similarities and differences.

I have also tried to design my courses in ways that take advantage of research on teaching and learning. Research has shown that repeated interaction with material improves student learning; consequently, I offer more low-risk opportunities for students to review the material before exams and essays (Svinicki, 2004). Since the average attention span is not well suited to long lectures, I make sure that each class period is interspersed with discussion or exercises (Middendorf and Kalish, 1996). Finally, I create opportunities to put knowledge into practice. In my European courses, for example, students take on the role of a national leader in a simulation of the European Council. They become familiar with their country and with current European politics through online discussions, before proposing and debating policy ideas in-class using the Council’s real voting rules. This exercise lets students put course concepts directly into practice, as well as en-

courages them to evaluate current events from a theoretical perspective.

I also work to incorporate my research into teaching. My areas of study—election integrity, authoritarian politics, and democratization—touch on issues that are frequently covered in introductory and upper-level comparative politics courses. I draw on my research to show how electoral manipulation comes in many forms, how it is not always (or even very often) purely about winning elections, and how it can occur at times in established democracies. I also work to illustrate how authoritarian politics are varied, complex, and (in my view) interesting. I draw on concrete examples for Russia, including my own fieldwork, to show how life and politics in a modern authoritarian regime may not fit students' expectations.

Student evaluations suggest that this approach has been successful; in the most recent course for which evaluations are available (Spring 2019), students' mean evaluation of my overall effectiveness as a teacher was a 5 out of 5. I have consistently received high marks for communicating clearly and logically, promoting a climate of mutual respect, encouraging questions, and using teaching strategies that promote active involvement. These results are particularly gratifying, since they reflect my strongly held teaching priorities. More detailed student evaluations, including student comments, are available on my website.

I am committed to fostering a diverse learning environment, and to the academic success of students from under-represented backgrounds. I have volunteered in the Royster Advanced Mentoring Program, which pairs members of the Royster Society of Fellows with first-generation, low-income undergraduate student advisees. Through that program, I acted as a mentor for two students of color, and also served on the organization's leadership team for two years. As an instructor at a large public university, the students I work with come from a variety of backgrounds; consequently, I work to create an inclusive environment and to include skills training in the classroom; this can help even the playing field for students who come from less privileged backgrounds (Fink, 2013). In my most recent course evaluation, students' median ratings for promotion of mutual respect and encouragement of student questions were both 5 out of 5. As one student wrote, "I think the discussion format really allows for the class to better understand and analyze the course material... discussions among students [helped] bring up new perspectives that other students may not have had."

Lastly, I work to be transparent with students about the purpose of each assignment, to seek out student feedback, and to make changes if the course is not working as intended. I try to design assignments and exercises that are broadly useful to students beyond the classroom context, by helping them practice career skills. By promoting small-group and full-classroom discussion, I work to foster an environment where all students feel comfortable sharing their ideas and questions. My goals are to make political science useful and informative for majors and non-majors alike. In sum, I try to present political science in a way that helps students better understand events at home and around the world, and to become more engaged and discerning citizens.

References

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