

TEACHING STATEMENT

My research addresses the ways in which education can enhance the vitality of American democracy. In particular, I focus on ways to ensure that young people (including those from marginalized backgrounds) can play an active role in shaping their communities and the decision-making processes of elected officials. My experiences as a public school teacher and a teaching assistant at Northwestern University have taught me that the classroom is an important environment to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve these ends. Thus, my teaching philosophy is guided by a commitment to (1) centering the voices of the students that I teach, (2) making course content relevant to their lives, (3) ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented in the content of the course, and (4) providing fair and timely feedback on assignments.

I achieve these goals by using a variety of strategies that allow students to guide the overall trajectory of the course, apply course knowledge to “real world” problems, and expand their awareness of the various challenges and perspectives that comprise pluralist democracies. These strategies include: weekly exit surveys that allow students to provide feedback and raise clarifying and extension questions about course content; weekly mini-lectures that address student feedback and questions from the previous class; case studies that provide students with opportunities to apply political science theories to current events; and small-group discussions that allow students to build the written and oral communication skills needed to be active participants within their communities.

I am excited to teach a variety of courses in the future. Over the past eight years, I have taught in under-resourced public schools in the United States and the Middle East and have served as a teaching assistant for a number of undergraduate courses, including Introduction to American Politics, Environmental Politics, and Political Parties and Elections. During this time, I have also been entrusted to conduct one-on-one advising with undergraduate students working on their B.A. thesis projects. While I look forward to teaching a variety of American politics courses in the future, I also am well-trained to teach methods courses including introductory statistics, experiments, survey design, interviewing, and mix-methods approaches. Furthermore, I am also prepared to teach introductory political theory courses, particularly democratic theory.

STUDENT VOICE

My first goal is to ensure that student voices are centered within the classroom. Student voice refers to the unique values, experiences, perspectives, and opinions held by individual students and groups of students within an educational space. As an instructor, centering student voice means utilizing techniques to enfranchise students in the educational process. In order to achieve this, I use a class format known as interteaching (Boyce and Hinline 2002). This approach departs from the traditional lecture-based models, allowing students to work through weekly discussion questions first within peer-learning groups and then as a class. This provides students with multiple opportunities to (1) formulate their thoughts and (2) explore ways to effectively communicate those thoughts to diverse audiences. Civic skills of this kind tend to be associated with higher rates of civic participation outside of the classroom (Verba et al. 1995). Education research as well as

my own teaching experiences demonstrate that this approach is effective both in small discussion groups and lecture halls.

Interteaching also provides students with consistent opportunities to share feedback with me and raise clarifying and extension questions within weekly exit surveys. These surveys ask students to rate the clarity of the discussion section, their level of engagement, their confidence with applying course concepts to cases, and topics that they would like to have clarified or receive more details on in the next class. I then use this feedback to develop mini-lectures that work to address concerns or misconceptions and generate discussion questions motivated by each student's interests and concerns. Additionally, this approach provides the space for students to self-advocate by explicitly encouraging them to raise questions and concerns that ultimately guide the trajectory of the course. For example, one student remarked in their end of course evaluation that my strength as an educator was related to my commitment to creating engaging discussions by "including student opinion in the discussion of some heavy readings" (CTEC for U.S. Environmental Politics). Another student remarked that I am "attentive to students and [am] able to really connect with students [by teaching] in a way where every student felt engaged and appreciated" (CTEC for Introduction to American Politics and Government)

RELEVANT CONTENT

My second goal is to ensure that the content presented within the course is relevant to the lives of my students. I believe that theories presented within political science courses are useful and provide students with tools that they can leverage to be more engaged citizens. However, making this connection is contingent on my ability to present applicable case studies that are salient and relevant to my students. For example, as a teaching assistant for the Introduction to American Politics and Government course, I served as guest lecturer for the week addressing civic and political participation. However, rather than focusing on participation broadly, I discussed the applicability of existing theories on the political behavior of 18 to 24-year-olds. This thematic approach contributed to two measurable outcomes. First, students were able to challenge dominant narratives regarding lackluster rates of youth political engagement. Students began to understand that while young people tend to vote less frequently than older generational groups, they are also more likely to volunteer in their neighborhoods and more likely to participate in acts of private politics such as boycotts than older generational groups (Zukin et al 2005; Cohen 2010). Second, more than 90 percent of my students reported in their weekly exit survey that the lecture increased their interest in the 2018 midterm election.

In presenting content, I also strive to apply existing political science theories to the geographical context in which students can most immediately apply their learning. For example, while leading a lecture on voter turnout in the Political Parties and Campaigns course, I placed additional focus on Chicago's mayoral race and issues that were driving voter registration and turnout efforts in specific neighborhoods throughout the city. One student remarked "the lecture [Matt] provided was interesting and educational and the readings he gave were incredibly important to read – especially the gentrification in Chicago article – to learn about our city" (CTEC for Political Parties and Elections). In addition to bolstering student engagement, I believe making content immediately relevant to the lives of students is one way to enhance American democracy in the classroom.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Third, I ensure that readings and case studies reflect diverse perspectives that accurately portray the pluralist nature of American democracy. When I refer to diversity, I mean social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class, as well as political perspectives. During my time at Northwestern, I have worked with faculty to include research by women and underrepresented groups on course syllabi, which work to complicate dominant narratives about American politics. For example, during my guest lecture in Introduction to American Politics and Government, I included Cathy Cohen's *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics* on the syllabus. While a lecture on political participation can present a unidimensional narrative about "civic duty" and "responsible citizens," the inclusion of Cohen's work pushed students to consider that participating in politics is riskier for member of certain communities. Texts of this kind not only challenge students intellectually, but center less vaunted narratives that push them to reflect upon the pluralist nature of American democracy.

Case studies used to apply political science theories also allow students to consider diverse perspectives. For example, while facilitating a discussion section for U.S. Environmental Politics, I had my students conduct a stakeholder analysis where they listed the concerns of the various actors involved in the debate over the designation of Bears Ears National Monument. While participating in this activity, I watched as conservative students became more empathetic towards indigenous land claims while liberal students started to understand how federally-designated monuments contributed to economic anxieties among rural ranchers. The goal of this activity was not to convince my students to take one position over another, but to consider the nuanced perspectives that contribute to pressing political challenges. My hope is that activities of this kind ultimately work to build knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and foster empathy.

FEEDBACK

Finally, I am committed to providing students with fair and timely feedback that deepens their own learning throughout the course. I do this using three steps. First, I ensure that students are provided individualized feedback on assignments within one week of submission. Second, I promote transparency by providing students with a distribution of the class' scores as well as some basic statistical analyses that aim to reveal any scoring biases that may emerge along racial, ethnic, and gender lines. Third, I hold in-depth feedback sessions for students where I walk through ways to (1) better incorporate course readings into their analyses, (2) model how to more effectively structure an argumentative essay, and (3) demonstrate how to pull demographic data and employ various social science methodologies to better inform their arguments. This process was especially important when I served as a teaching assistant for the Undergraduate Thesis Seminar in which I was responsible for providing weekly feedback to 15 undergraduate students writing an honors thesis. These students worked on projects spanning every political science subfield and incorporated multiple methodological approaches, meaning that I needed to be able to speak to multiple literatures and methodological techniques at a moment's notice. While this experience was challenging, it pushed me to use feedback as an opportunity to improve my clarity as an educator, build relationships with individual students, and deepen my knowledge of the discipline as whole.

My approach to feedback is consistently praised by my students in end of course evaluations. In terms of depth of feedback and equity, one student stated that “Matt is very kind and inclusive, and even explained [that he] did not find huge variances between men and women while grading our midterms. He returns all assignments within a timely manner and includes very helpful comments along with his scoring. He really enhanced this class for me,” (CTEC for US Environmental Politics). Another student remarked that I “respond to emails super quickly, grade fairly and timely, [am] actively engaged in class each day, and always seem really willing to help. I really like how he held extra bonus discussions to help with the [writing assignments] and integrating course readings and social explorer data,” (CTEC for Political Parties and Elections).

CONCLUSION

In sum, my approach to teaching, which aligns closely to my research, aspires to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to address community challenges and influence political decision making. I achieve this by structuring class in a way that allows students to exercise their voice, making theories presented in class relevant to their lives, and providing content and experiences that push them to expand their knowledge of the diverse perspectives that contribute to America’s pluralist democracy. I am a unique candidate for professorships because research and teaching are one in the same for me; my research informs my teaching and my experiences in the classroom inform my research questions. Both my research and my teaching evaluations are a testament to the effectiveness of this philosophy. I am confident this approach will make me an effective educator in multiple institutional settings in the future.

REFERENCES

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