

TEACHING STATEMENT

My teaching aspires to enhance the vitality of American democracy, allowing young people, and especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to play a more active role in shaping their communities and the decision-making processes of elected officials. My experiences as a public-school teacher, an instructor of record at both Northwestern University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and as a professor at the University of Miami 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.

STUDENT VOICE

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 based on student choice, interests, and feedback. This is democracy in action. In order to achieve this, I utilize a class format known as interteaching. This pedagogical 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.

Interteaching also provides students with consistent opportunities to share feedback with me and raise clarifying and extension questions within weekly exit surveys. 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.” 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.”

RELEVANT CONTENT

I believe that theories presented within political science courses are useful and provide students with tools that they can leverage to be more informed political actors. However, making this connection is contingent upon my ability to present applicable case studies that are salient and relevant to my students. For example, in my courses at the University of Miami, rather than focusing on participation broadly, I discuss the applicability of existing theories on the political behavior of 18 to 24-year-olds. This thematic approach contributes to two measurable outcomes. First, students are able to challenge dominant narratives regarding lackluster rates of youth political engagement. They understand that while young people tend to vote less frequently than older generational groups, they are also more likely to volunteer in their neighborhoods, more likely to participate in acts of private politics such as boycotts than older generational groups, and are more likely to create political art. Second, 90 percent of my students reported in a weekly exit survey that this lecture and discussion increased their interest in the 2022 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, when I taught in Chicago, I placed additional focus on local politics and addressed issues that drive 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.” 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.

CENTERING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

I ensure that readings and case studies reflect diverse perspectives that accurately portray the pluralist nature of American democracy. Women, people color, and LGBTQ+ individuals are thoroughly represented in the syllabi I design. These materials allow my students to reassess dominant narratives about American politics and push them to reflect upon their own socialization. For example, I include Cathy Cohen’s *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics* on my American Politics syllabus. While a lecture on political participation can present a unidimensional narrative about “civic duty” and “responsible citizens,” the inclusion of Cohen’s work pushes students to consider that participating in politics is riskier for members of marginalized 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 as a teaching assistant 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

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 undergraduate 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.

These feedback sessions were especially important when I taught a Social Studies Content for Teachers course at Northwestern University in which I was responsible for providing weekly feedback to 15 undergraduate and graduate teaching candidates developing unit plans that they would actually utilize in their classrooms. These students worked on lessons spanning every social science discipline at multiple grade levels, meaning that I needed to be able to speak to multiple literatures and pedagogical 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." 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 data sources."

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. Both my own research and my teaching evaluations are a testament to the effectiveness of my teaching philosophy. I am confident this approach will make me an effective educator in multiple course settings in the future.