To what extent do students connect with political science?

William O'Brochta[1]

New and innovative revisions to introductory political science courses aim to help students with little to no background in the discipline see its relevance. Yet, these revisions rarely ask students themselves what they think is interesting about political science and how they connect to the discipline. I evaluate those connections that students make to political science when exposed to the discipline for the first time by analyzing student research memo writing assignments from five introductory American politics courses taught at a medium-sized public university in the Deep South. Student life experiences, interest in certain current events, or intended career path most frequently provide connections to political science. While some students do have innate curiosities about the discipline that they seek to investigate, this study suggests that introductory political science course instructors may wish to give students more flexibility to choose parts of the discipline that relate most to them so as to make political science more relevant to their lives and their educational experience.

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[1] Assistant Professor of Political Science, School of History and Social Science, Louisiana Tech University. 1308 West Railroad Avenue, Ruston, Louisiana 71272. 318-257-2890. obrochta@latech.edu. https://williamobrochta.net.

How do students connect with political science when being exposed to the discipline for the first time? Most students in introductory courses are not familiar with what political science is or why it is useful. These students might be from other majors taking a political science course or they might be declared majors in their first political science course. Often the first task of a faculty member teaching a course consisting primarily of students new to the discipline is to explain what political science looks like as a field. Then what? What are the ways that students connect to political science and make it relevant to them?

Focusing on how students connect with political science for the first time can help faculty approach teaching courses consisting of students new to the discipline in a way that will cultivate student interest and engagement. Existing literature has shown that student interest in introductory courses --- which have the highest concentration of students exposed to political science for the first time --- is typically low (Kalaf-Hughes 2021; Kingsbury 2021). This is especially true for non-majors, whose attention and engagement are often difficult to capture and may differ from majors (Cotner, Thompson, and Wright 2017; Gasim, Stevens, and Zebidi 2012; Knight and Smith 2010). Student surveys (e.g., Knight and Smith 2010) and observations suggest that students relate better to and are more motivated by courses that engage with current events (Hewitt et al. 2019; Rankin 2010), teach marketable career skills (Fedesco, Kentner, and Natt 2017; Huguet et al. 2020), present diverse viewpoints (Belet 2018), and use high-impact teaching practices (Damron and Mott 2005; Maloyed 2016).

I look beyond student surveys and evaluate the ways in which students actually make connections during a course by examining their written work. The primary advantage of this approach is that the written work constitutes a major component of the course, so students are

more likely to choose to make connections about which they are truly excited and invested. This provides a more holistic view of how students connect to political science.

I examine student connections to political science by evaluating research memo assignments students completed in introductory American politics courses at a medium-sized public university in the Deep South. These assignments ask students to engage with the political science research process throughout the course by selecting a research question of interest and writing a literature review, theory, and research design in a series of scaffolded assignments. Since students engage with this assignment for such a significant portion of the course and choose a research question that they are interested in, examining these assignments provides a student perspective on what political science topics and themes they think are important and how they connect to these topics. I find that students connect to topics with personal relevance including tying political science to their major, intended career, life experiences, and current events that are directly impacting them. This result is intuitive, and it suggests that faculty may want to structure introductory courses in a way that asks students about their connections to political science and frames course content around these connections.

Models of Connection

Given the exploratory nature of this study where the purpose is to let student connections speak for themselves, I describe two models of how students might connect with political science. What I call the "curiosity-content model" gives instructors agency over the connections that students make to political science. This model starts with a widespread recognition that traditional introductory course designs may not be effective, and it asserts that one way to address this problem is by the instructor innovating on the ways in which canonical curricular

content is taught. Such innovations include new course framing (Brandle 2018), adding in new topical foci or varying traditional content (Evans and Lindrum 2013; Smith 2012), choosing new or innovative texts (Albert and Ginn 2014; Bengtson 2009), or including diverse voices or perspectives in the curriculum (Allen and Wallace 2010; Bird and Yesnowitz 2008; Houston 2022; Olivo 2012). With these innovations, the curiosity-content model asserts that students will become more curious about traditional political science topics and better connect to them.

A second approach is the "student-directed model." Courses following this model retain some of the same curricular focus as courses in the curiosity-content model, but provide substantial opportunities for student agency in choosing projects, topics, or activities about which they are interested (Hellwege 2019; Maloyed 2016; McBeth and Robison 2012; O'Brochta 2022; Saks McManaway and Lorentz 2021). In this model, students take their interests outside of political science and more directly fit them into the content that they learn in a political science course. These interests can include issues that they have identified in their lives or in the community that relate to political science, current events that they feel are important, or connections to their major or intended career.

Research Design

I evaluate student connections to political science to determine whether they better fit the curiosity-content or the student-directed model of connection using data from five introductory American politics courses taught by the same instructor during academic year 2021-2022.[2] The

[2] This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (HUC-22-029). Replication data will be provided on the author's website; they will consist of the variables coded from the research memo. The actual memos and direct quotations from them are withheld to protect student privacy.

courses were taught at a medium-sized public university in the Deep South with about 8,600 undergraduate students. The university has three faculty in political science and about 100 political science majors. Courses are taught by faculty members; there are no teaching assistants. The political science major requires taking this introductory course alongside an upper-level course in comparative politics and a course in research design and methods, along with a number of electives.

Though the course is fundamentally about American politics, it also serves as an introduction to political science for primarily non-majors, as it is the only introductory course offered in political science.[3] One faculty member consistently teaches this course. The course has a typical enrollment of between 40 and 80 students. It is required for several majors, most notably nursing and education. Students from all years take the course, though the typical student is a freshman or sophomore. Students in the course have not taken a previous course in political science. The only exception are transfer students who, in rare cases, may need to re-take the course. In other words, this course represents students' first exposure to political science.

Class sessions occur in-person and include a mix of small group activities and discussion. Course content includes typical topics in American politics like local and federal institutions, civil rights and liberties, and political behavior. Also included are topics that introduce political science as a discipline like the social science research method, international politics, comparisons to other country contexts, and a lesson on political theory. Reoccurring assignments include using social annotation software to read and annotate political science journal articles before class, in-class short writing assignments, and self-assessed class notes. There is a substantial community engaged group service-learning project and a scaffolded research memo assignment.

[3] This is relatively standard in the discipline (Hierman 2021).

The research memo is an abbreviated version of a research article wherein students identify a research question, summarize relevant scholarly literature, develop a theoretical argument and hypothesis, propose a research design to test the hypothesis, and discuss policy implications. This memo assignment is completed in three scaffolded parts, comprises 35% of students' grade in the course, and takes up significant class time. Students must choose a research question about which they are truly interested since they will engage with that question throughout the term.

I rely on students' research memo assignments to measure how they connect to political science. This shows the connections students are making to the discipline instead of asking students to list the connections that they make. Students may not have sufficient background in the discipline to articulate exactly how they think that political science is relevant when asked. Therefore, evaluating written work reveals actual connections that students make and does so after students have worked with the same research question for the entire course.

The research memo assignment is scaffolded in three parts. First, students identify a one sentence research question and write a paragraph about why they are interested in that research question. To prepare students, a class session is devoted to constructing research questions. Research questions must follow a strict format to help ensure that proposed research questions are measurable and falsifiable. As alluded to in the title of this article, one way that helps ensure that questions are non-normative is to ask students to start their questions with "to what extent."

Students submit their research question and paragraph about a week after it is assigned, and we proceed to discuss the first half of the research memo during class. This part of the memo includes the introduction, prior literature, and theory and hypothesis. Students learn techniques to search for sources and find at least six peer-reviewed political science journal article sources

covering two topics (or literatures). For the prior literature section, students synthesize the sources to develop an overall sense of prior work on each topic they selected. They then describe the sources within a topic and discuss how their research question is related to, but different from the topic. In essence, this is a standard literature review, but one focused on only two bodies of literature. Students then develop a testable hypothesis and explain the causal mechanism by creating and walking the reader through a diagram linking their independent variable to their dependent variable and their independent variable to an alternative hypothesis.

Students have about four weeks to write the first half of the research memo, and several class sessions review key memo skills like finding literature and making a theoretical argument. Upon submitting the first half of the memo, we discuss the research design and policy implications sections. Students are required to revise the first half of their memo based on the instructor's rubric feedback and then to add a hypothetical research design. This research design covers standard topics including the empirical approach, measurement, validity, specific procedures for data collection and analysis, control variables, and robustness checks. Finally, students add a conclusion that emphasizes the policy implications of their research memo. The completed research memo is due at the end of the term, about four weeks after the first half of the memo was due.

For this study, I look at the final research memo and evaluate the title, first sentence, hypothesis, and statement about why the topic is relevant either to American politics or to the student. These are basic features included in the rubric for the research memo provided to students on the first day of the term and reviewed several times during the course. Using hypotheses in students' final research memos, I identify their independent and dependent variables and units of analysis. I then group the units of analysis into a focus on either people's

attitudes and behavior or places. Next, I code each memo as belonging to a topic. I do this using a generative coding approach wherein I read through all memos and created broad categories based on common themes across them. Focusing on the variables, titles, and first sentences in each memo, I group similar memos into more specific categories.[4] Finally, I categorize the connection that students made to political science by examining their stated motivation for writing the memo. This categorization represents the main quantity of interest.

Results

Table 1 shows basic descriptive statistics of the students enrolled across the five introductory courses, including their classification and declared major. As expected, most students were freshman or sophomores by credit hours.[5] Student majors were varied and included representation from across all colleges at the university. Only 7% of students in the course had a declared major in political science.

[4] I acknowledge that there is, of course, some subjectivity in this procedure, but it should still effectively illustrate broad trends.

[5] Many students have high school Advanced Placement or dual enrollment transfer credits and, therefore, first term freshman are often classified as sophomores by credit hours.

Table 1: Classification and Major

Classification	%
Freshman	0.37
Sophomore	0.39
Junior	0.17
Senior	0.07

Major	%
Engineering*	0.14
Education[x]	0.14
Nursing	0.13
Computer Science	0.11
Interdisciplinary Studies	0.09
Political Science	0.07
Business+	0.06
Psychology	0.05
Sociology	0.05
History	0.04
Biology	0.04
Other	0.04
Architectural Studies	0.03

Note: *N*=235. * Includes chemical, mechanical, biomedical, electrical, civil, cyber, construction, industrial, and instrumentation engineering majors. [x] Includes pre-kindergarten through third grade, first through fifth grade, and sixth through twelfth grade education majors. + Includes business administration, marketing, and finance majors.

Table 2 lists the most popular independent and dependent variables used in the hypotheses that students wrote for their research memos along with an example for each variable. Regulation was the most common independent variable, and welfare was the most common dependent variable. Students were often interested in how regulations of a certain industry or profession --- usually one that they were interested in entering --- impacted social welfare or worker welfare. American politics courses rarely devote much time to the federal bureaucracy and even less to state or local bureaucrats and regulations, so student interest in regulation may be an opportunity to adjust course content. This is particularly interesting because the bureaucracy is typically considered one of the most "boring" topics in an introductory American politics course for both instructors and students. Dependent variables related to social welfare or political opinions were common, as students were interested in how a political phenomenon related to their own well-being and influenced their opinions.

Table 2: Independent and Dependent Variables

Variable	IV %	DV %	Example
Regulation	0.14	0.04	IV: Teacher licensing requirements
Media	0.09	0.00	IV: Media consumption
Welfare	0.09	0.16	DV: Satisfaction with life
Political opinions	0.07	0.15	DV: Support for pipeline projects
Political knowledge	0.07	0.05	IV: Statistics about police brutality
Education	0.07	0.08	DV: Student test scores
Social media	0.05	0.01	IV: Social media use
Funding	0.05	0.00	IV: County taxes
Political behavior	0.00	0.10	DV: Follow public health guidelines
Polarization	0.02	0.05	DV: Perceived polarization
Voting	0.00	0.04	DV: Voter turnout
Other	0.35	0.31	

Note: *N*=164. Variables coded from research memo hypotheses.

Table 3 lists the units of analysis students used when constructing their hypotheses. These units of analysis are grouped into ones that focus on people doing something (labeled "people") or something changing across geographic areas or over time (labeled "places"). Many students were interested in hypotheses involving people and their actions and behaviors. Of those students, most did not specify certain qualifiers on the types of people about which they were interested, choosing instead to focus on how their hypothesis worked with all people. Among students whose unit of analysis was places, states were the most common choice. This aligns with students' interest in regulations, as many regulations of interest are set at the state level and provide the variation across states needed to test a hypothesis.

Table 3: Unit of Analysis

Unit of Analysis	%
People	0.62
People	0.45
Politicians	0.02
Teachers	0.02
Other	0.13
Places	0.38
States	0.16
Parishes	0.05
Countries	0.02
Schools	0.02
Cities	0.02
Other	0.11

Note: *N*=164. Unit of analysis coded from research memo hypotheses. Groupings for people and places shown with the units of analysis belonging to each in italics.

Table 4 lists the topics of students' research memos, along with the most common major of students who wrote a research memo about a given topic. Clearly, education and nursing majors were interested in topics related to their intended careers. Other common topics were mostly a collection of commonly discussed political issues. Example hypotheses give a sense of the ways students approached each topic.

Table 4: Topics

Topic	%	Most Common Major	Example
Education	0.15	Education	If a school district increases teacher pay, then learning outcomes for students in that school district will improve.
Healthcare	0.10	Nursing	If nurses think that the number of federal government healthcare regulations is increasing, then they will feel more constrained in the treatments they administer.
Courts/Justice	0.08	Psychology	If a judge spends more time during a child custody court proceeding, then the welfare of that child will improve.
Social media	0.07	Interdisciplinary Studies	If a politician knows more information about the Internet and how to use social media, then constituents will believe that they are a more effective legislator.
Voting and Elections	0.07	Computer Science, Engineering, Nursing	If a person is younger, then they are more likely to believe that voter turnout will increase if the electoral college is abolished.
Polarization	0.07	Computer Science	If people perceive that political extremism is increasing, then they will be more likely to support violence against political opponents.
Media	0.07	Computer Science, Engineering	If a person consumes more news stories about the problems with artificial intelligence, then they will be more likely to support stricter privacy regulations.
Firearms	0.05	Engineering	If the number of firearm regulations in a state increase, then gun violence in that state will also increase.
Economy	0.04	Interdisciplinary Studies	If a person believes that inflation is too high, then their discretionary spending will decrease.
Abortion	0.04	None (evenly distributed)	If a person is pro-life, then they are more likely to support increased surrogacy regulations.
Civic Engagement	0.04	None (evenly distributed)	If the number of people who have social capital in a city increases, then the health of people in that city also increases.
Other	0.23		

Note: *N*=164. Topics coded from research memos. Most common major of students writing about a given topic shown along with an example hypothesis.

I then categorized research memos based on students' motivations for writing the memo. If student motivation followed the curiosity-content model, then most motivations should be innate interest in a topic. If student motivation followed the student-directed model, then motivations might include personal experiences, current events, or student career goals. Students were asked to describe their interest in their memo topic in the text of their memo. Four motivations emerged that align fairly well with the two models of connection. First, 39% of students connected with political science using a topic related to current events. Table 5 lists the most common majors with this motivation along with the topics most often associated with this motivation. Abortion, firearms, and the economy (particularly gas prices and inflation) were common topics because students heard about them on the news during this time period. Students mentioned specific events from the news as motivating their interest in a topic like incidents of gun violence in their hometown, the Covid-19 pandemic, and legislation that was enacted. A student's motivation was coded as "current events" if the student did not personally experience the event but mentioned that it was a current topic of discussion. For example, a student who described how they were personally impacted by a recent crime was coded as "personal experience," whereas discussions of crime trends in a community was coded as "current events."

Table 5: Motivation

Motivation	%	Majors with this Motivation	Topics with this Motivation
Current Events	0.39	Biology, Sociology, Business	Abortion, Firearms, Economy
Interest	0.24	Computer Science, Engineering, Nursing	Courts/Justice, Polarization, Voting and Elections
Personal Experience	0.23	None (evenly distributed)	Civic Engagement, Education, Social Media
Major	0.15	Education, Nursing	Education, Healthcare

Note: *N*=164. Motivations coded from research memos. Majors and topics most associated with each motivation are listed.

Personal experience was often associated with students who made observations about their social media feed, who experienced issues with (usually secondary) school quality, or who tried to get involved in their community and had trouble doing so. Interestingly, students chose to write about personal experiences relatively uniformly across majors.

As mentioned earlier, education and nursing majors are required to take this course, and these students logically decided to link political science to their major by choosing topics like education or healthcare, respectively.

The final motivation is a residual category that I call "interest." Students whose research memos fell into this category said that they were motivated by topics because of innate interest; no specific current event or personal experience was mentioned. This category most closely reflects the curiosity-content model. Yet, the three topics most closely associated with interest as a motivation were the courts, polarization, and voting and elections. These topics were particularly salient during the data collection period, but students discussed them as general problems without pointing to a current event or personal experience that prompted their interest in the topic. For example, several students said that political polarization is a big problem and that they are interested in trying to find solutions to it. The implication is that polarization is a more pressing problem now than in the past. However, since the typical student taking this course is between the ages of 18 and 30, students do not have personal experience with or cannot point to a specific current event where polarization increased. Thus, many students motivated by interest appeared to be indirectly motivated by current, pressing issues.

A subset of students whose motivation to choose their research memo topic was because of interest had no clear motivation connected to current events or personal experiences. We might expect these students to ask canonical questions in political science. This was the case to

some extent, with some research questions about the importance of precedent setting and others addressing the dynamics of political party competition. However, students were also interested in topics like sexual assault policies, corruption, and information literacy that are not addressed in a typical American politics course.

Discussion and Conclusion

Data from research memos in introductory American politics courses suggests that students connect with political science through current events, personal experience, their major or intended career, and innate interest in the discipline. The curiosity-content model, therefore, may not be sufficient to engage students, regardless of efforts to revise curricula to make them more engaging. Political science is facing declining course and major enrollments, as students are unsure of the value of studying the discipline (Kingsbury 2021). Reorienting courses toward civic engagement, experiential learning, and marketable research and analysis skills are likely successful ways to address this problem (e.g., Maloyed 2016; McBeth and Robison 2012). Yet, students, particularly non-majors, may remain reluctant to enroll in a political science course even with these adjustments because canonical topics are covered that are of limited interest to these students.

The study results lead to two suggestions for introductory course instructors. First, provide opportunities for students to make connections to political science, fully embracing the student-directed model. Assignments that allow students to choose their own topic are a good start. These assignments need to be coupled with active engagement with students individually to draw out connections of interest (Buskist and Wylie 1998; Dowds 1998). Students new to the discipline cannot be expected to know how their construction engineering major relates to

political science or that the issue that they observe in their local school system results from secondary education policies that vary by state. Without an instructor to help make these connections, students will likely struggle to find a topic that they think makes a good connection to political science. Readings should also be carefully selected to represent gender, ethnic, and regional diversity in the discipline so as to promote the discussion of diverse perspectives (Scola, Bucci, and Baglione 2021).

Second, anticipate connections that students are likely to make and adjust course content accordingly. This does not necessarily mean changing the topics covered in the course; rather, instructors may want to revise in-class activities, discussions, and examples to better fit student interests. For example, a lesson on federalism can be focused on a current event where states responded differently or a lesson on local government can emphasize infrastructure if many students are civil engineering majors. Framing topics in a way that makes them accessible and relatable is also important (see also Stump 2013). Emphasizing civic and community engagement is helpful here. While a discussion of the judicial branch may appeal mostly to pre-law students, more students might be interested if the topic is focused on jury duty --- a civic action many students will participate in at some point.

The topics and connections that the students in this study made to political science are certainly different than those at another institution. Yet, the lesson that students connect to political science in ways that are not included in the typical introductory political science course may be more generalizable. Future work would do well to survey students who choose not to take a political science course to gauge their perceived connections to the discipline and how they might be strengthened to promote increased course enrollment. Students exposed to political science for the first time primarily connect with the discipline through concrete topics like

current events, their intended career, and personal experiences. Relying on innate curiosity and intrinsic interest in canonical political science topics is not enough to connect with most students.

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