Political History and/as the Future for Undergraduate American Politics Curriculum

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Introduction

On June 20, 2020, President Trump began his general re-election campaign in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Trump's then-campaign manager, Brad Parscale, booked the BOK Center for the kickoff event, hoping to pack the 19,000 seat indoor arena. The mid-sized Tulsa arena was no Trump Tower golden escalator; the inaugural campaign event could never reanimate the spectacular strangeness of Trump's entrance to the 2016 race. However, by mid-2020, Trump was deeply familiar with the rhythms of arena-stage politicking, and raucous crowds had become a signature feature of his speeches around the country. COVID-19 shutdowns, beginning in March 2020, had put a temporary stop to Trump's touring schedule. Yet despite the real public health dangers of a crowded indoor rally, Tulsa was a chance to return to a kind of normalcy. Interest in the event seemed high, and Trump promised event-goers a "wild evening."[1] In the days before the rally, the Trump campaign boasted that more than 800,000 ticket-requests had been processed on the campaign's official website, a number which Trump himself inflated on Twitter to "millions."

The highly-touted Tulsa event fizzled. Attendance was anemic – nowhere near Parscale's bombastic predictions, for which he was later removed from his position as campaign manager. Having watched the story unfold in real-time, media pundits were delighted by one specific explanation for the Trump event's embarrassing miscalculation: so-called "TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans" who, in an entirely predictable viral trolling effort, claimed to have flooded the Trump campaign's ticket registration system with false reservations.[2]

Reflecting on the rally that wasn't and the subsequent media coverage, *New York Times* opinion columnist Charlie Warzel cautioned against the seeming desire amongst pundits to see Gen Z as the potential savior of American politics. Drawing on a variety of survey data, Warzel paints a portrait of a generation for whom "alienation is not a feature" but "the overarching context" and lacks an adherence to a political ideology.

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[1] Jonathan Swan. 2020. "Trump: Expect 'wild evening' in Tulsa, mask optional." *Axios* (June 19). Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://www.axios.com/2020/06/20/trump-axios-interview-tulsa-rally

[2] Taylor Lorenz, Kellen Browning, and Sheera Frenkel. 2020. "TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally." *The New York Times* (June 21). Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html

Activity with political implications, he warns us, is not necessarily the same as political activity. This op-ed gestures at the precarious position of political science as a field study: why dedicate energy to a studying system you have already deemed broken?

While enrollments in the political science major have declined at many institutions, including our own, we argue that teaching undergraduate American politics courses through the lens of American Political Development (APD) offers an opportunity to frame our work in a way that capitalizes on the turbulence in contemporary politics. An APD approach lets us pitch our major as the place where students can gain insight on the construction of seemingly given conditions and how citizens have and can deconstruct and reconstruct them. Moreover, it allows us to overcome some of the hurdles posed by the distribution model that remains the prevalent structure of many political science undergraduate programs.

The paper proceeds in six parts. We begin with an overview of the context within which students encounter the discipline of political science: the current political moment, trends in youth political viewpoints and activities, and the state of the undergraduate political science major. We provide a brief description of our institutional and departmental context before moving to a discussion of the particular strengths of APD as a subfield. The concluding section outlines the curriculum we've developed as well as our initial reflections on its strengths and limitations.

The Current Political Moment

Our understanding of the current political moment takes shape amidst a growing chorus of voices—across disciplinary subfields within political science, and indeed across disciplinary fields in the social sciences and humanities—that we are living through an era of unusually sharp threats to American democracy. Such threats have honed their respective edges in a variety of ways, but they come to an aggressive point in January 6th, 2021, specifically, and more generally in the Republican Party's wide, ongoing embrace of the "Big Lie" that buffeted an insurrection at the US Capitol Building and continues to support more than 40% of Americans' belief that President Biden did not legitimately win the 2020 election.[3]

Addressing this question of layered threats to democracy, prominent scholars have built a dense warren of analyses dedicated to the origin, nature, and consequence of such threats.[4] Recently, Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes have characterized this "end of democracy" literature "as something of a horror genre where

[3] Maya Yang. 2022. "More than 40% in US do not believe Biden legitimately won election - poll." *The Guardian* (January 5). Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/05/america-biden-election-2020-poll-victory

[4] The literature here is expansive and impossible to capture in the space of a footnote, ranging from the literatures on emergent fascism, misinformation politics, and contemporary abolitionist organizing to biographies of Trump Administration officials.

extant institutions are brutally violated and civic ideals savaged as monsters emerge to tear the body politic limb from limb, leaving it in red and blue pieces that may never be reattached."[5] While HoSang and Lowndes contend that the current threats to democracy are less "novel" than they are constitutive of the "mainsprings of American political culture," we believe their critical summary of the literature is in apt one: in the mainline view, American-style liberal democracy today confronts a constellation of crises – a "monstrous" hydra of threats, each next one chipping away at the very foundations of our collective civic life.

For example, and to illustrate the multiplicity of threats described in the "end of democracy" literature, in an interview with the Harvard Gazette published just before the 2022 midterm elections, Theda Skocpol, Archon Fung, and Erica Chenoweth extended a wide-ranging set of warnings about the source and nature of threats to American democracy, including: obstructionist control of court appointments in the US Senate and gerrymandering ("now an art") at the state level, which coalesce into a durable kind of minoritarian rule; abandonment of traditional norms around elections, especially in recognizing winners and refusing "the use of violence as a legitimate part of the political process"; as well as burgeoning conflict between "rule of law" institutionalists and the normative principles of participatory democracy, most notably in states where "trifecta" Republican Party control builds newer and ever-more creative challenges to Constitutional election procedures such as recognizing "alternative slates of electors," among others.[6] Whether this amounts to "democratic backsliding" (Fung) or the emergence and proliferation of "electoral autocracy" (Chenoweth) is a unsettled analytic point, perhaps, but one point on which they all agree: "it may be naive to hope for a savior of democracy."[7]

Taking a longer view in their recent book *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy,* Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman trace historical patterns of American democratic instability, arguing that "four threats" have given rise to five prominent episodes of crisis for the nation.[8] For Mettler and Lieberman, "political polarization, conflict over who belongs in the political community, high and growing economic inequality, and excessive executive power" each (and on their own) have the wherewithal to destabilize the "four pillars" of democracy: free and fair elections, the rule of law, the legitimacy of political opposition, and the integrity of political rights.[9] What makes the current crisis especially dire is, on their reading, the convergence of all four threats simultaneously – a conjunctural overlap of destabilizing forces that,

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[5] Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes. 2023. "Right-Wing Studies: A State of The Field," in *The Journal of Right-Wing Studies 1*(0), pp. 10-12.
[6] Alvin Powell. 2022. "Where Are We Going, America?" *The Harvard Gazette* (November 4). Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/11/where-are-we-going-america/
[7] Ibid, quoting Archon Fung.
[8] Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman. 2020. *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy.* New York: St. Martin's/Griffin.
[9] Ibid., 5.

altogether and at the same time, advance an unprecedented threat to the future of the American polity.

And lest we bracket the "end of democracy" literature as capturing something like burgeoning sectional division – driven perhaps by states like Georgia and Florida that have, in recent years, seemed to behave more as "laboratories of authoritarianism" than "laboratories of democracy"[10] – Jacob M. Grumbach's research on recent sub-national democratic shifts suggests a very different explanation in line with Mettler and Lieberman's historical-developmental study.[11] Looking at state-by-state data from 2000-2018, Grumbach's comparative analysis shows that political conditions in some states grew more democratic while in "other states… democracy narrowed dramatically, as state governments gerrymandered districts and created new barriers to participation and restrictions on the franchise."[12] Intriguingly, despite state governments' "constitutional authority to structure and administer many of the most important democratic institutions in the American political system," Grumbach finds that "within-state dynamics" cannot explain variations in what he calls "state-level democratic performance."[13] Instead, Grumbach shows that one key factor explains the narrowing of democracy: "Republican control of state government," which "consistently and profoundly reduces state democratic performance during this period."[14] This suggests that our current "crisis of democracy" is not merely the sum of patchwork conflict within the US government's federated structure.

Indeed, the roots of the crisis run much deeper. How we reached this current political moment remains a fundamental and powerful organizing question – and one that should shape our thinking on democratic possibility and curricular design. And, while the students on our campuses are unfamiliar with specific research above, they are certainly attuned to the politics it interrogates. As the next section indicates, the result is a generation of students by turns alienated from and suspicious of America's political institutions and (supposed) governing ideals, attuned to the way political (in)action intersects with their lived existence, and determined to create change.

Trends in the Political Perspectives of Youth

Anecdotally, we know through our experience teaching in the classroom and working on college campuses that our students are attuned to the uneven political terrain of the present moment. This sensibility is reflected in studies. Research shows

[10] For this explicit argument, see: Steven Ziblatt and Daniel Levitsky. 2018. *How Democracies Die.* New York: Broadway Books, p. 2.
[11] Jacob M. Grumbach. 2022. "Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding." *American Political Science Review, First View,* pp. 1-18. Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000934
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

that current traditional college-aged undergraduates—broadly falling into the demographic of "Generation Z"—are anticipated to be a particularly politically engaged generation. According to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), before the 2018 midterm elections a "vast majority" of 18-24 year olds:

> 81%, [believed] that as a group, young people have the power to change things in this country, and two-thirds (66.8%) [believed] that 'dramatic changes' are possible if people demand change. As we have noted in previous analyses, this energy and enthusiasm can be a crucial motivator of political engagement or be a result of opportunities to change, but only if combined with concrete information and tangible opportunities to participate.[15]

In 2020, CIRCLE again polled 18-24 year olds, finding that "83% say they believe young people have the power to change the country, 60% feel like they're part of a movement that will vote to express its views, and 79% of young people say the COVID-19 pandemic has helped them realize that politics impact their everyday lives."[16]

After January 6, 2021, some evidence suggests that the moods shaping youth opinion and political engagement have changed. For example, Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics (IOP) reports in their Spring 2022 Harvard Youth Poll that 45% of 18-29 year olds surveyed said "that politics has a negative impact on their mental health," a measure that jumps to 64% for LGBTQ youth.[17] Following up on this line of questioning, IOP's Fall 2022 Harvard Youth Poll reports that "more than 7-in-10 young Americans (72%) believe that the rights of others are under attack" and that "59% believe that their own rights are under attack."[18] Such polling echoes much of the "end of democracy genre" permeating popular and scholastic political analysis. Indeed, in response to the question "Which of the following phrases best describes the United States today?", 60% of those surveyed selected "a democracy in trouble" or "a failed democracy," while another 24% selected "somewhat functioning democracy." However, in a report released in December 2022, CIRCLE finds that:

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[15] CIRCLE. 2018. "Ahead of the 2018 Midterms, a New Generation Finds its Political Voice." Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/ahead-2018-midterms-new-generation-finds-its-political-voice

[16] CIRCLE. 2020. "Poll: Young People Believe they Can Lead Change in Unprecedented Election Cycle." Accessed January, 2023 at: https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/poll-young-people-believe-they-can-lead-change-unprecedented-election-cycle

[17] Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics. 2022. "Harvard Youth Poll, 43rd Edition, Spring 2022." Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/spring-2022-harvard-youth-poll

[18] Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics. 2022. "Harvard Youth Poll, 44th Edition, Fall 2022." Accessed January 25, 2023 at:https://iop.harvard.edu/fall-2022-harvard-youth-poll

> While the majority of all voters, regardless of age, feel that our democracy is threatened, young voters in 2022 were slightly more likely to feel like it is "very" or "somewhat" secure (35%). That sentiment is much more prevalent among young men (47%) than young women (24%)—though it's worth noting that young white men were overrepresented and data on young Black and Latino men was not available.[19]

This post-2022 Midterms CIRCLE report suggests that youth participation and civic engagement, while negatively impacted by broader shifts in national political discourse, remains higher in measures of political efficacy and overall outlook when compared to other age demographics on the future of American democracy.

When looking at the rates and forms of young people's participation in politics, the most recent research shows that overall youth participation today remains at or near historic highs. IOP's Fall 2022 Harvard Youth Poll reports that 28 percent of 18-29 year olds surveyed see themselves as politically active, while 45% follow news about national politics closely.[20] According to CIRCLE, 2022 Midterm voting rates for 18-24 year olds were 27%, the second highest recorded (after 2018, which was 31%).[21] Importantly, beyond electoral participation, civic engagement continues tracking higher. For example, a 2021 CIRCLE report notes:

> Across the country, teenagers and young adults have banded together to lead movements that have organized massive rallies aimed at ending gun violence, climate walkouts and marches, and protests to demand racial justice. CIRCLE's research reveals a surge in the number of young people who reported having participated in marches or protests: from 5% in 2016, to 16% in 2018, and 27% in 2020.[22]

Similar trends in young people's political participation take place in a variety of higher education contexts. In broad terms, political activism—particularly issue-based advocacy—has seen a resurgence among college students. This is exemplified by widely recognizable youth-driven movements and organizations like March for Our Lives and the Sunrise Movement. More specifically, summarizing recent trends in campus-based protest formation, Robert A. Rhoads emphasizes the critical nexus of race-, immigration-, and gender-based student activism central to 21st century campus

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[19] CIRCLE. 2022. "Youth Voter Turnout and Impact in the 2022 Midterm Elections," p. 25. Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2022-12/early_data_youth_vote_report.pdf
[20] Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics. 2022. "Harvard Youth Poll, 44th Edition, Fall 2022."
[21] CIRCLE. 2022. "Youth Voter Turnout and Impact in the 2022 Midterm Elections."
[22] CIRCLE. 2021. "Protests, Politics, and Power: Exploring the Connections Between Youth Voting and Youth Movements," p. 1. Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2021-09/Youth_Movements_Executive_Summary.pdf

protest,[23] while Rose M. Cole and Walter F. Heinecke highlight the cross-issue fertility of activist "vision" animating contemporary student "resistance to the neoliberalization of the academy."[24]

College students' participation in electoral politics has also benefited from the concerted effort of a range of nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations and programs dedicated to mobilizing the college student vote. Over the last twenty years, and particularly in the last four election cycles, there has been significant growth in this space which now includes a range of national certifications, competitions and clearinghouse organizations (e.g. the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, Students Learn Students Vote, Voter Friendly Campus) and funding and training for student interns and fellows (e.g., Campus Vote Project, Andrew Goodman Foundation, Student PIRGs). In April 2022, the Biden administration bolstered these efforts in a Dear Colleague letter emphasizing the obligations of higher education institutions to facilitate student voting and permitting students to be paid via federal work study funds to participate in these efforts.[25]

Unfortunately, while national trends on youth political participation and campus-based student activism project a promising (if still *merely* promising) profile on the horizon, this story is not necessarily translating to interest in political science as a field of academic study. This disconnect between activism and formal disciplinary study through political science invites questions. Specifically, we are concerned about how potential future approaches to activism will grapple with, or even comprehend, the strategic imperatives and creative action we would hope for amidst fast-moving threat and complex political contingency.

The State of the Undergraduate Political Science Major (UPSM)

If we take simple national numbers into account, the contemporary state of the UPSM is something like a declension narrative. Consider the number of undergraduate degrees in political science awarded nationally in the US. According to data published in the 2017 American Political Science Association Departmental Survey report, in 2011 approximately 40,000 undergraduate bachelors degrees in political science were awarded; in 2016, that number shrank to approximately 34,000 degrees, or merely

[23] Robert A. Rhoads. 2016. "Student Activism, Diversity, and the Struggle for a Just Society." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education 9*(3), pp. 189-202. For his discussion of contemporary campus-based activism, see especially: pp. 195-199.
[24] Rose M. Cole and Walter F. Heinecke. 2020. "Higher education after neoliberalism: Student activism as a guiding light." *Policy Futures in Education 18*(1), p. 91.
[25] Michelle Asha Cooper. 2022. "Requirements for Distribution of Voter Registration Forms" (April 21). https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2022-04-21/requirements-distribution-voter-registration-forms

1.77% of all undergraduate bachelors awarded nationwide – a figure that at the time constituted "the lowest percentage ever recorded."[26]

Yet the shrinkage in degrees conferred is only one aspect of larger concerns identified by John Ishiyama in his recent 2022 report on the "Rethinking Political Science Education" Task Force. There, in bold, direct terms, Ishiyama paints a picture of tectonic shift. Student populations are changing; they are enrolling in degree programs differently – and for different reasons; they are increasingly ethnically diverse; they are more likely to be women; and they are increasingly likely to be of non-traditional (18-24) college age.[27] Altogether, this means that, today, the "discipline faces challenges that didn't exist" previously, prompting reflection on – and substantive revision of – the fundamental structure of the UPSM to better respond to these challenges.[28]

The disciplinary debates about the structure of the UPSM reach back to at least 1991, when John Wahlke's "Liberal Learning and the Political Science Major: A Report to the Profession," (or the "Wahlke Report") collected and summarized data on political science major programs from 200 departments ("both large and small, public and private, research and non-research institutions") across the United States.[29] The Wahlke Report was based on the objective that political science programs, as part of a liberal education, should work to develop students' "general intellectual abilities."[30] However, the Wahlke Report found that "political science programs today collectively present a picture of disparate and unstructured practices," in turn interrupting the foundational goals of liberal education and contributing to an "amorphous conceptualization" of the discipline itself.[31]

A particular point of concern in the Wahlke Report was the too-common lack of curricular "sequencing" – or clear, integrated linkages between course offerings – which may create roadblocks for students' ability to "continually utilize and build upon concepts, information, and skills" across the curriculum.[32] Instead of offering well-connected major programs, political science departments most typically deliver content through a "distribution" approach, where students select a grab-bag of courses from a loosely-rendered "minimum number of sub-fields" in order to fulfill major requirements.[33] However, the Wahlke Report stresses sequencing coursework to reinforce conceptual understanding because "the purpose" of the UPSM "is not simply to arouse their curiosity, purvey factual information, or reveal the significance of

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[26] Statistics quoted in: John Ishiyama. 2022. "An Introduction to the 'Rethinking Political Science Education' Task Force." *Political Science Today*, p. 4. Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://doi.org/10.1017/psj.2022.1

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., p. 5.

[29] John C. Wahlke. 1991. "Liberal Learning and the Political Science Major: A Report to the Profession." *PS: Political Science and Politics 24*(1), p. 48.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., pp. 50-1.

[32] Ibid., p. 55.

[33] Ibid., p. 50.

political events and issues," but rather "is to equip [students] for coping with political events and governmental actions and future problems."[34] In other words, the Wahlke Report recommends that the UPSM should be designed to help students develop from "politically interested" to "politically literate."[35]

Among several other important recommendations, the Wahlke Report also argues the need for providing deeper – and different – kinds of political context to students through conscientious curricular design. Specifically, it recommends teaching introductory American politics and government courses with greater emphasis on cross-national comparison, as well as "main-streaming" the "character and implications" of racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity such that these topics are not taught in specific classes "as a separate and unique problem to be dealt with in a particular course or two by a particular faculty member."[36] Because "almost all programs have tacitly admitted the minority-blind character of traditional courses," curricula must address issues of diverse political identity in all courses to better prepare students as "competent analysts of political issues and problems" as well as cultivate "responsible citizens."[37]

Despite its influence on pedagogical research within and about the discipline of political science, recent reflections on the legacy of the Wahlke Report as an engine of programmatic change reveal that it charts a path largely untaken. For instance, Maureen Feeley and Renee Van Vechten "find that the questions raised by the Wahlke Report nearly three decades ago remain relevant: What are our goals as a discipline for our undergraduates to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed as twenty-first century thinkers, problem solvers, and citizens?"[38] Similarly, E. Fletcher McClennan argues that the "distribution model" criticized by the Wahlke Report remains dominant through a combination of institutional inertia and lack of credible forums for investigating alternative curricular designs that might reorganize disciplinary hierarchies privileging research-focused institutions.[39] Steven Rathgeb Smith and Meghan McConaughey frame the Wahlke Report as largely a product of its historical context, arguing that it "offered a blueprint for a comprehensive political science major in an era of relative stability in higher education" long since gone.[40] Today, "political science as a discipline must adapt to a vastly altered institutional and social landscape," one where curriculum needs to "connect to the increased demand for professional skills

[34] Ibid., p. 49.
[35] Ibid., p. 50.
[36] Ibid., p. 53.
[37] Ibid., pp. 53-4.
[38] Maureen Feeley and Renee Van Vechten. 2021. "Whither the Political Science Major? Curricular Design and Program Learning Outcomes at 110 US Colleges and Universities." *PS: Political Science and Politics 54*(2), p. 366.
[39] E. Fletcher McClellan. 2021. "Curriculum Theory and the Undergraduate Political Science Major: Toward a Contingency Approach." *PS: Political Science and Politics 54*(2), pp. 368-372.
[40] Steven Rathgeb Smith and Meghan McConaughey. 2021. "The Political Science Undergraduate Major and Its Future: The Wahlke Report–Revisited." *PS: Political Science and Politics 54*(2), p. 359.

and emphasize the particular advantages of the political science major" – like interpersonal skills, effective writing, civic skills and education, and data analytics.[41]

At Oswego, our major faces many similar challenges and structural constraints to what are described in this review. In the following section, we offer a brief overview of our program and an overview of why we see APD as a subfield within American politics particularly well-positioned to overcome some of the challenges facing the major while also meeting students where they are.

Institutional Context: SUNY Oswego

The State University of New York at Oswego is a comprehensive college within the 64-campus State University of New York (SUNY) system. It currently enrolls around 7000 students, about 87% of whom are seeking undergraduate degrees. As a predominantly white institution (PWI) located on the shore of Lake Ontario, SUNY Oswego traditionally draws its student base from Central and Upstate New York. However, given the long-standing economic decline of the region associated with (and even pre-dating) deindustrialization of the former rust-belt, which has limited the number of traditional college-age students in the area, the University undertook an intentionally expansive recruitment strategy beginning in the mid-2000s which targets recruitment from New York City, Long Island, and surrounding Downstate areas. Correlated to this recruitment shift, the campus has seen considerable increase in its underrepresented minority (URM) student population. According to the most recent data published by SUNY Oswego Institutional Research and Assessment, approximately 14% of the student population identified themselves as URM in 2012, while in 2020 and 2021, approximately 25% identified themselves as URM.[42] Across a similar span of time, SUNY Oswego has maintained consistent rates of student Pell Grant eligibility, with Institutional Research and Assessment reporting that between 2014 and 2021 approximately 40% of undergraduates were Pell-eligible.[43]

The SUNY Oswego Department of Political Science profiles as a mid-sized program. Currently, the department has six tenured or tenure-track faculty. Of those six faculty, three teach our Global Politics courses (International Relations and Comparative) and three teach American Politics courses, with one of those three Americanists focused explicitly on the Courts.

Traditionally, the enrollment cycle of the department has demonstrated measurable post-election year increases or "bumps," followed by slow declines over the next four years, after which the cycle resets with another post-election enrollment

[41] Ibid., pp. 359-60.
[42] SUNY Oswego Institutional Research and Assessment. 2021. *SUNY Oswego Fall 2021 Factbook.* Accessed January 25, 2023 at: https://www.oswego.edu/institutional-research/ira-fact-book
[43] Ibid.

bump, and so on. Within this general trend—which patterned through Fall 2013-Fall 2016, and then again through Fall 2017-Fall 2020—the department kept somewhere between 100 and 85 students in the program. However, beginning in Fall 2021, it concerns us that we started a new post-election cycle with a new enrollment low: only 77 students were enrolled in the program to start the Fall 2021 semester. While the COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious complicating factor (which translated into similar rates of enrollment decline for cognate disciplines at SUNY Oswego), that does not change the fact that we missed a measurable enrollment bump that otherwise would have supported our program for a full election cycle.

Programmatically, our department is eclectic in style, substance, and approach to studying politics. Our faculty are generally uninterested in policing disciplinary boundaries and have demonstrated this in our curriculum by collapsing the traditional subfields of International Relations and Comparative Politics into a single Global Politics track. Likewise, our department is very active in supporting interdisciplinary programs across campus, regularly teaching courses in Global Studies, Sustainability Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, American Studies, and the Honors Program. Methodologically we are qualitatively-focused. Our faculty specialize in historical and interpretive research methodologies that inform our classroom work with students.

The current structure of our political science (POL) major squarely follows the "distribution" model of content delivery. Students majoring in POL are required to complete three introductory courses in each of our three major subfields (American Politics, Global Politics, and Political Theory); at least one upper-division course in each subfield; as well as a capstone research seminar course. While we usually attempt to seat students in introductory courses during their first year in the major, this is not technically necessary as the only requirement for most upper-division courses is 3 hours (or a single course) of previous work in POL. Overall, the distribution model offers both faculty and students maximum flexibility with minimal limitations; faculty enjoy significant latitude to teach courses on an ad-hoc basis, and students enjoy the freedom to pursue a menu of coursework that supports their own curiosity, interest, and passion.

But with department-level enrollment stability concerns, shifting institutional priorities and austerity pressures across campus, as well as a lived-understanding of the significantly different context for higher education originally discussed in the Wahlke Report and revisited with new urgency in Ishiyama's Rethinking Political Science Education Task Force, we are no longer confident that the distribution model adequately serves the interests of our department or our students. Maximal flexibility combined with tightening resources in the context of increasingly vexing public problems is not a recipe for successful cultivation of "general intellectual abilities." To confront this concerning dynamic and create a path forward for ourselves and our students, we recently undertook the effort to design and structure a "sequenced" set of upper-division American Politics courses that mirror and support our training and research specialization in APD. This structured APD approach represents our

commitment to transparently teaching the field of American politics as we know it. We also believe it allows us to emphasize a rich variety of ways students can grow as readers, thinkers, and writers, with our curriculum encouraging a kind of vital political creativity that connects our classrooms to urgent public problems.

American Political Development

As one branch of the interdisciplinary historical-institutionalist turn that first drew substantive and methodological links between sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, history, and law in the 1970s and 1980s, APD was christened as an intellectual project in the fires of heterodoxy and critique. Informed especially by early comparativist research on state formation and the development of state capacity – and then later buoyed by the "Perestroika Movement" that challenged dominant quantitative methodological orthodoxies within the American Political Science Association[44] – Suzanne Mettler and Richard M. Valelly describe APD as a "dissenting form of political science" that, even some thirty-seven years after the founding of its flagship sub-disciplinary journal *Studies in American Political Development*, "still retains a critical edge."[45]

In our view, APD retains this "critical edge" by self-consciously traveling between the silos of the traditional political science subfield model. At its strongest and most illuminating, APD is a capacious, question-driven approach to thinking about and studying political problems. It follows questions where they lead, not where disciplinary prescriptions demand. And through its ambitious embrace of history as the site and source of political analysis, work in APD is necessarily comparative in scope – explaining the politics "ordering mechanisms" and patterned continuities, episodic resurgences and "cycles" of conflict, and "disjunctive" moments of institutional dysfunction, dynamic contingency, and entropic decay that create "durable" change over time.[46]

Tracking a similar line of thinking to APD's necessarily comparative scope, Karen Orren and Steven Skowronek explain that APD is also necessarily "theory-driven" in its orientation, using history as a seedbed for "building" theories of politics that grasp "processes of change conceptually, in general terms, and in considering their broader implications for the polity as a whole."[47] By rooting its approach to historical political

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[44] For discussion of the "Perestroika Movement" in academic political science, see especially: Kristen Renwick Monroe. 2005. *Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science.* New Haven: Yale UP.
[45] Suzanne Mettler and Richard M. Valelly. 2016. "Introduction: The Distinctiveness and Necessity of American Political Development," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, eds. Richard M. Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman. Oxford: UP, pp. 1-2.
[46] Mettler and Valelly, 2016, "Distinctiveness and Necessity of APD"; see also: Karen Orren and Steven Skowronek. 2004. *The Search for American Political Development.* Cambridge: UP.
[47] Orren and Skowronek, 2004, *Search for American Political Development*, p. 6.

phenomena in concepts, Orren and Skowronek distinguish APD as "characteristically more aggressive in its manipulation of patterns and more radical in its departure from a chronological view of history" than cognate disciplines. Ultimately, this means that political history is most important when it is that which expands our understanding of how the political present was made (and then re-made, and re-made again). In other words, APD is well suited to helping students grapple with big questions about how we got here, and what we might need to do to make something new.

Concepts and comparison describe a kind of epistemological framework for APD, but how are these grounded in practical forms analysis? For APD scholars like Valelly, considering the processes and pathways that make the political present invites us toward examining the fundamental intellectual "tools" available to researchers and teachers in the field. "A basic part of the APD toolkit," he writes:

> is the concept of 'political construction.' The idea is to trace how and why both highly salient and apparently obvious (but nonetheless puzzling) features of the political present or past were consciously and unconsciously made over time - whether entrepreneurially, collectively, as a byproduct of other actions, or unintentionally.[48]

The analytical tool of "political construction" is highly generative – especially insofar as Valelly's definition of it includes an expansive repertoire of "constructive" actions and actors. From the individual to the crowd, and from purposive decisionmaking to mere accident, present conditions arrive through this interpretive lens not as predetermined or inevitable outcomes, but as things struggled (or even *tripped*) over in the course of doing the stuff of politics. This component of the APD "toolkit" thus presents an extraordinary opportunity for students of American politics to think about their own role(s) and political lives, their capacity for individual and collective action, and the various pathways through which political decisions have – and may yet again – lead to more desirable outcomes for the polity.

Since its contentious founding, APD has found welcome refuge in pockets of the discipline. Indeed, our respective scholarly backgrounds – having been trained in different political science graduate programs at the University of Oregon and the University of Washington – speak to this point. However, APD's curricular influence remains a live question, especially at the undergraduate level. In an important study on teaching APD in political science programs published as the subfield was rapidly expanding, Rogan Kersh reviewed a small collection of both graduate syllabi (n=12) and undergraduate syllabi (n=11) dedicated APD courses in order to take stock of the

[48] Richard M. Valelly. 2012. "LGBT Politics and American Political Development." *Annual Review of Political Science 15*, p. 319.

subfield's curricular development.[49] All of the courses Kersh reviewed were delivered between the Spring 2000 semester and the Spring 2003 semester. Although he finds an uneven application of the subfield across the 23 sections, he also offers insight into the promise of APD in the classroom. "Students in APD courses," he writes:

> will gain above all a sensitivity to context, especially the multiple influences and traditions that shape American politics, and an awareness of the potent possibilities of political engagement. They will also recognize that an animating force of political development is *politics*, thanks to APD scholars' detailed studies of legislative battles, citizen movements, and the like. These lessons in turn can foster a heightened understanding of the duties and opportunities of citizenship.[50]

We see this "sensitivity to context" as one of the most promising aspects of APD. Although Kersh's description of it as promoting "awareness" and "understanding" might suggest otherwise, sensitivity to context is, as we understand it, a deeply practical skill or "tool"– much like Valelly's definition of political construction in that it, through careful application, can help reveal the mechanisms of historical political process. Cultivating sensitivity to context is therefore critically important if APD will find success in its curricular projects.

In his study of the collected APD syllabi, Kersh also notes some shared deficiencies and limitations of the then-maturing subfield. For instance, he argues at length against the curricular transposition of a notable gap in the published scholarship in APD, one where writers often neglect or altogether avoid providing foundational definitions of "political development" itself.[51] Interestingly, Kersh also points out that "few graduate or undergraduate APD syllabi feature many primary sources at all," suggesting that these APD courses preferred a mixture of burgeoning "canon" secondary source material that performs dual labor as a map for the sub-disciplinary development of APD.[52]

To summarize, in our view the strengths of APD are four-fold. First, we appreciate the subfield's heterodox history and position within the discipline of political science, which continues to foment an important "critical edge" in the very best APD scholarship. Second, we believe that APD's development of "theory-driven" concepts, rooted in rich historical phenomena and case studies, allows it to speak intelligibly across temporal distance and link present problems to earlier formative moments. Third, common components of APD's analytic toolkit, such as "political construction," invite careful analysis of process, durability, and change between those formative

[49] Rogan Kersh. 2005. "The Growth of American Political Development: The View from the Classroom." *Perspectives on Politics (3)*2, pp. 335-345.
[50] Ibid., p. 337.
[51] Ibid., pp. 340-1.
[52] Ibid., p. 339.

moments. And fourth, through its cultivation of "sensitivity to context," APD is specially situated to encourage much needed vitality in analyses of how we reached this particular political moment.

Although like many others we believe APD excels in equipping its students to carefully assess and explain the connections between past events and present circumstances, we also believe it can help us think about what it takes – and what it means – to make change in a thoughtful, meaningful way. This future orientation is not necessarily the traditional goal of APD scholars despite the fact that activist dispositions and attitudes are often only barely covered over by the trained posture of scholasticism.[53]

Recently, cutting to the marrow of questions about the relationship between APD and possible political futures, Daniel Kryder and Ryan LaRochelle have argued that APD is particularly well positioned to engage in what they call a "scholarship of foresight."[54] In its caricatured form, APD might be understood as backward-looking – or, riffing off Kryder and LaRochelle, a kind of "scholarship of hindsight." However, they argue that some well-known APD analytic frameworks – such as policy feedback processes,"the interaction of structure and agency, seeking the factors that enable entrepreneurs to overcome constraints," scholarship on social movements and their interaction with the "sprawling and fragmented" state, as well as a general attention to recurrent patterns and cycles – might be "reconfigured and repurposed" for a more explicit engagement with future implications.[55] Such a reconfigured approach would equip scholars with the tools to interpret both the rhetorical and institutional contexts in which they hope to make change, opening opportunities for APD scholarship to speak to political movements in real time.

Moreover, Kryder and LaRochelle argue that teaching APD will be important ground for testing and tuning their "scholarship of foresight." Creative problem-solving is necessary in a world with complex threats and overlapping crises. In order to combat this, they write :

> Our teaching should receive the institutional support it needs to (1) shift our interpretive frames away from constraints and toward agency, contingency, and innovation; (2) support our efforts to identify important real-world problems through the use of simple principles such as democracy, fair enforcement, and reduction of harm; and (3) provide students with the knowledge, skills, and frameworks that will help them develop solutions to those problems.[56]

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[53] There are numerous examples of this in the literature, but for an especially important recent demonstration of APD scholarship rooted in activist sensibilities, see: Megan Ming Francis. 2018. "The Strange Fruit of American Political Development." *Politics, Groups, and Identities 6*(1), pp. 128-137.
[54] Daniel Kryder and Ryan LaRochelle. 2022. "Our Future at Risk: Toward an American Political Development Scholarship of Foresight." *Studies in American Political Development 36*(2), pp. 161-166.
[55] Ibid., p. 164.
[56] Ibid., p. 166.

As noted earlier, such APD curricular work on creative problem identification and solution building necessarily functions well beyond the American context, building insight into complex global threats and crises as well.

SUNY Oswego APD Curriculum Overview

Over the last four years we have developed a focused, upper-division American politics curriculum that balances our unique departmental strength in APD with the resource constraints of a modest-sized faculty working within an undergraduate-serving comprehensive college. Our goal is simple. We aim to provide students with the tools necessary for sharp interrogation and deep understanding of political context – both of the past events that structure the present moment, as well as the possibilities for change woven through the present. In other words, alongside the foment of the "end of democracy" literature, Ishiyama's "Rethinking Political Science Education" Task Force, and Kryder and LaRochelle's call for increased future-orientation in our work as APD teachers and scholars, we mean for this curricular framework to develop the specifically *political* thinking necessary for our students to make the change we need in the world.

This APD-focused curriculum is built around five loosely sequenced upper-division courses that we (the co-writers) are committed to offering on rotation as a non-required optional concentration for students interested in American politics. Given our small department size and comparative resource constraints, it is important to note that these courses share conceptual footing but must remain discrete for a variety of reasons. They are not officially "linked" or part of a rigidly scaffolded sequence. Instead, we designed them to offer complimentary standpoints within a shared conversation, enabling students to move into (and out of) that conversation as they pursue their degree. Loose sequencing in this way helps us mitigate some of our current department-level enrollment concerns; these APD-focused upper-division courses are open to POL majors and interested non-majors that meet relevant pre-requisite requirements, as well as those who receive instructor approval. The sequence is outlined in Table 1 below. This table identifies the official course number, title of course, pre-requisite requirements, whether or not it emphasizes research methods training, whether or not it focuses on reading and analysis of primary historical documents, and whether or not it incorporates major research and/or writing as part of the course requirements.

Table 1. SUNY Oswego Upper-Division American Politics Curriculum

Course	Title	Pre-Req's	Methods	Primary	Research
POL 305	Power & Institutions	POL 205	Yes		Yes
POL 306	African-American Political Thought	POL 205		Yes	Yes
POL 316	American Political Thought	POL 203 and 205		Yes	Yes
POL 346	American Political Development	3 POL credits	Yes		Yes
POL ###	American Political Movements	-----		Yes	Yes

POL 305 Power & Institutions serves as an unofficial gateway course into the sequence and is designed to develop students' critical reading and writing skills as well as provide practical methodological introduction to historical archival research methods typical for APD-style research projects. There, students develop hands-on research skills in Penfield Library's Archives & Special Collections; they also receive an introduction to working with digital archives – a critical and complex new skill set for historical researchers to understand as important research collections are digitized and made evermore available to the public. POL 306 African-American Political Thought, POL 316 American Political Thought, and our newest (as yet unassigned) course on American Political Movements all focus on students carefully reading and critically engaging with primary historical documents as they expand substantive knowledge of formative political contexts. Like Kersh, we see working with primary documents as an important component of APD teaching, and including our coursework in political thought within the APD sequence was an important step in accomplishing this goal. Lastly, POL 346 American Political Development serves as a "topical" capstone to the sequence, with further emphasis on relevant historical research methods that support student research projects. As a kind of sequential capstone, POL 346 is also intended to be the most flexible course in the sequence, where faculty may structure individual offerings around major works in the field, timely responses to public problems, specific interest, or any other reasonable approach to course design.

As outlined, this upper-division American politics sequence can be offered on a four-semester rotation. Our original intention was to offer one section of POL 305 every semester to best onboard students into the planned upper-division coursework; between Fall 2020, when we debuted the course as a special topics course (POL 300), and Fall

2021, we offered the course each semester. Per semester enrollment data, presented in Table 2 below, reports consistently high student engagement with the course, with sections ending each term near capacity. This table identifies the teaching term, the faculty instructor, total enrollment at the end of term, course caps (or seat limit), and fill rate percentage. Fill rates for POL 305 average just over 92.9%, which we see as a promising student response to the curriculum change.

Table 2. POL 305 Power & Institutions Enrollment Data (2020-2021)

Term	Faculty	Total Enrolled	Course Cap	% Filled
Fall 2020	Plencner	24	25	96
Spring 2021	Rank	22	25	88
Fall 2021	Plencner	18	19	94.74

Due to structural constraints outside of our control, in Fall 2022 we shifted from offering POL 305 every semester to a now-planned once-yearly schedule. Enrollment in POL 305 remained high, with 23 students enrolled at a 25-student course cap (92% fill rate). Even with this slight change to planned delivery, given the positive student response and roadmap for the future we are optimistic about this APD-focused upper-division curricular sequence and believe it is a significant enhancement to our major.

Anecdotally – through hallway conversations with students – we have some initial reflections on the curricular change. One common critical thread is that students tend to see the APD-focused sequence as too "history focused." We interpret this as a failure on our end, at the course level, to effectively contextualize the historical political content in a way that shepherds students toward deeper understanding of the contemporary moment. More positively, the APD-focused sequence seems to effectively create space for students to focus on building specific skill sets like close reading, building an argument, and the fundamental steps of the research process.

In the future, we plan on expanding our approach to assessment beyond anecdotal conversations. Specifically, we are interested in conducting entry and exit surveys for all students in the major, as well as developing methodological skill-focused assessments for POL 305.

Conclusion

This paper outlines our response to fundamental challenges confronting higher education institutions generally, and some of the acute challenges we face at our institution specifically. Given its particular analytic strengths, conceptual rigor, and constitutive future orientation, we argue that teaching undergraduate American politics courses through the lens of APD offers an opportunity to work in response to and against the turbulence of contemporary political life. As we make clear, APD is no savior. At its best, APD is a point of departure. With our sequenced upper-division American politics coursework leveraging our unique departmental strength in APD, we aim to provide students the experiences and tools necessary to make the world they want to live in.