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University of South Florida
APSA Teaching & Learning Conference
Section: Media Literacy, Information, and Curriculum
February 10-12, 2023

Teaching Political Grievances Through Political Speeches and Primary Documents

Abstract: This paper discusses how to facilitate learning for students who have limited knowledge of the history and context of critical topics related to political grievances by examining primary documents such as political speeches, op-eds, and other first-person documents to evaluate the grievances, social movements, and political ideologies from the Revolutionary War through the Trump and Biden presidencies. The presentation will describe how students begin to build a foundation of critical thinking, writing, and listening to a broad range of political views to promote life-long civic learning and engagement.

Keywords: political grievances, primary documents, speeches, tyranny

Note: Due to time constraints, this is a narrative of my class. Therefore, I was unable to include peer-reviewed sources and data to support the methodology and course design of this class.

Introduction:

In 2020, I was asked to design a course for the University of South Florida's Judy Genshaft Honors College that would provide the students with a learning experience that would not be provided to them in a traditional curriculum in the university's political science department. *The Ethics of Political Grievances, Freedom, and the Response to Tyranny* is a 3000-level course that is classified as Ethical Reasoning and Civic Engagement. It focuses on intellectually rigorous critical thinking and promotes the development of stronger writing skills.

Course Design:

The discipline of American Political Development serves as the foundation for teaching the course. Students read speeches, letters, and interviews from political figures and activists from the Revolutionary War through the Biden Administration. The students are asked to consider how did American ideology evolve over time by asking "why," "when," and "how" questions to think more critically about contemporary political positions. The depth and breadth of the speeches allow students to explore a wide range of topics that have influenced how different political interests have fought to define the terms of freedom and democracy for their constituencies. More specifically, students learn how political discourse across party affiliations and movements has evolved over time to explain where we are today. Such questions include:

- How have citizens and political leaders and activists of diverse political ideologies expressed their grievances during different times in American history?
- How and why do leaders use language to influence political thought?
- How has the rhetoric of the politics of "the deserving" appeared in presidential speeches?

- Why do we think the way that we do about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and party affiliation?
- How have authoritarianism and tyrannical behavior appeared in American political rhetoric?
- When and why did many Americans reject social welfare and social safety net programs?
- How is language (rhetoric) used to describe personal responsibility and family values? And, how has that language evolved over time to address the social norms and political demands of the times?

It is important to reiterate that students learn that both major parties have had intraparty strife on questions related to who deserves to receive the full benefits and recognition of American citizenship.

Use and Selection of Speeches

The course was designed to encourage students to go “directly to the source” and learn how political and social filters and editors' interpretation or misuse of a speaker's words may change the meaning of the original intent of the speaker. Students learn the value of reading primary documents to understand how the American experience isn't one linear development of social progress. A review of these documents, although studied linearly by starting from the Revolutionary War era through the present demonstrates that while there are times of progress, there are times of stalemate and setbacks. This principle is learned by examining the speeches of establishment leaders and dissenters as well as presidents, movement leaders, and grassroots activists. It is also an opportunity to discuss why binary debates over the validity of the “1619 Project” by Nikole Hannah-Jones and the “1776 Commission” established by the Trump Administration should both be examined and debated. A full knowledge of history only serves to strengthen our democracy.

Students learn that although the foundational documents may be “dry” reading or have offensive language if they do not read them, they will not understand the roots of American political philosophy and thought. These documents include the Federalist Papers (citation), the Cornerstone Speech by Alexander H. Stephens, the anti-New Deal Conservative Manifesto of 1937, the Southern Manifesto of 1957, and the January 2, 2021 letter by U.S. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) and 11 other Republican Senators and Senators-elect who advocate for the delay of the Electoral College count on January 6, 2021 (Cruz et. al, 2021)

Topics of Speeches

The list of speeches may initially appear overwhelming. It is comprised of a broad range of ideological perspectives that help a diverse group of students to find issues and people that can promote engagement and enthusiasm in the course. The focus on historical dates and the rote memorization of civics has discouraged many students from taking classes based on policy and history. The selection of speeches helps them to see the complexity of political leadership and tyrannical laws. They learn how demagogic behavior manifests in both subjective and objective ways. The speeches help them to understand the foundations of political violence. The class discussion help students to understand the historical political development and evolution of the Democratic and Republican parties on a broad range of issues related to democracy, LGBTQ+, slavery, race, patriotism, political and economic segregation, and gender inequality. There are multiple discussions of the validity of the social safety net. Students discuss their views on how political rhetoric has impacted racial and social

reforms. They compare and contrast how politics impacted AIDS and COVID. Students who state that they are generally uninterested in politics are able to find topics of interest to them.

Readings

The speeches and writing assignments are supplements with select readings that are not dense, but promote conversation and help place the lectures into the context of the times and political culture and environment of the speech. Students are assigned to read *"The Soul of America: The Battle for our Better Angels,"* by Jon Meacham. The book tells the American experience as a narrative. It is very approachable for students who do not have a strong foundation in American politics and history. In addition, Meacham discusses leadership in the context of ethical decision-making and the consequences that leaders faced for making their decisions. In addition, students read the graphic novel version of *"On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century - Graphic Edition,"* by Timothy Snyder. The course originally used the traditional text version. However, the graphic novel is used to increase the book's appeal to STEM and male students who gravitate toward visual learning. The chapters are also short, digestible, and contain impactful lessons. The midterm and speech analysis paper is structured to accompany writing and presentation assignments.

Class Environment:

Although I have taught ten sections of this course, I continue to find that the students find consistent challenges as they engage in the coursework. This is fundamentally a class on political ethics. The principles of truth, honesty, and decency matter. While some may assume

that the material could be considered sensitive and potentially inflammatory, the class discussion is civil and engaging. Students learn on the first day of class the value and concepts of free speech. Students learn that it is my job as the instructor to manage difficult conversations. Rudeness or bad behavior regardless of your political ideology or point of view is not tolerated. No student can use the excuse that they will be “canceled” as a reason for not participating because free speech and decency serve as the basis of the class’ learning environment. The instructor must be permitted to manage the class discussion fairly. But also that the class is more interesting when you ask the professor difficult questions too. They are told that I already know what I think. I want to know what they think.

We discuss concepts that ask what are our fundamental duties as citizens, which include but not limited to, voting. Students are asked to consider if it is acceptable to deny facts for their “side” but demand integrity from their political opponents. They are asked to consider how fear influences their views. And how does learning new information challenge your opinion on issues you believe are “right?” And, if a student makes an assertion, ask where that information comes from and ask how do they know it is factually based.

My Challenges as an Instructor in the Honors College

I learned from my early experiences of teaching the class that I needed to help the student “warm up” and feel comfortable to express their authentic view and ask questions about topics and issues that may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with in front of their classmates. Many students have indicated that they were not encouraged not engage in controversial conversations in their high school classes. I let students know that it is my

responsibility to moderate the discussion by verbally explaining that no one gets canceled or shut down. I also use a slide early on in class that says “no one gets canceled in my class.” I believe because it was clear that I had the responsibility to manage the discourse, the class environment is both productive and engaging. Students have also indicated it was a new experience to discuss issues related to race, class, and social inequality and are as neutral and colorblind as possible. They also expressed that because the concept of civil discourse formed the basis of our discussions, it was possible to learn to listen to other points of view that they did not share.

I have also found that teaching honors students has come with additional challenges. At most, I may have one political science or social science major each semester. The overwhelming majority of the students are enrolled in STEM majors. Their writing style is often overly brief and resembles the conciseness of a lab report. It is often necessary to remind them that this is a critical thinking class and the responses should be reflective and require a more elaborate response. I have discovered that some students are overly brief because they do not feel like they have strong writing skills. And from my assessment of their writing projects, there are some students who have not mastered the mechanics of writing and grammar. Additionally, other STEM students believe that writing is a “soft skill” and it is irrelevant to their career success.

The college also has a significant number of international students. When I first started teaching the class I assumed that the primary challenge of teaching this course for this demographic would be that unfamiliarity with most of the individuals and topics on the

syllabus. And, the students generally say that they only know contemporary presidents and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, the opportunity and their interest to understand American society makes this challenge manageable. The difficulty that may not be apparent is the cultural learning styles and expectations. For example, it is my experience that some Asian and South Asian international students feel more comfortable if the professor calls on them rather than raising their hands. Additionally, I have had students from authoritarian countries who have shared in class that the topics under discussion would be considered illegal. This perspective has provided me with an opportunity to provide tangible, real-life examples of living under authoritarianism. Although, due to the authoritarian actions that Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL) has taken regarding courses and readings related to the social and political development of the United States, this course could face constraints from the Florida state legislature.

Practices for Promoting Student Success

This course is fundamentally centered on developing critical thinking skills. On the first day of class, students receive a document that shares my approach to learning the speeches. It is important that students understand that memorization is not the goal. Instead, they are encouraged to listen to the speech as they read it. The use of speeches is should be used as a tool to facilitate learning about how the speakers feel. They should think about the reaction of the audience to the speaker's words as well the long and short-term impacts of the values that the speakers are promoting to their audience and the political world. It is important to note that students are encouraged to find students that interest them. They learn that I do not pass

judgment on the speeches that they select. Even if they choose a speech that favors their political values, they find that they are exposed to new material that helps them to expand their knowledge on leaders and issues that have not appeared in the high school or college coursework.

Additionally, students watch a brief video to promote critical thinking called “Do you have the courage to dissent?” by Professor Christopher Freiman (Freiman 2017). The video comes from the perspective that individuals often determine if they have the right answer to a question by the number of people who agree on an answer. After the video, students are allotted seven minutes to answer one of the two questions as an icebreaker.

- Do you believe you have an obligation to dissent when the political leader that you voted for and support doesn’t tell the truth or harm fellow citizens? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that your dissenting voice can make a conversation about the challenges of our democracy stronger and more nuanced? Why or why not?

Class Preparation

Class participation constitutes 25% of the final grade. In an effort to help prepare students for constructive conversations with their peers, students are assigned to watch warm-up videos on the speakers or political issues for the week. The videos are found on Youtube and range from five minutes to twenty minutes. They are often news clips from the era, short documentaries, and interviews of the leaders. Videos often come from “US History 101” so they have engaging but informative videos about the subject matter of the week. The students are required to post their thoughts and impressions on Canvas for a threaded conversation with classmates. Each class begins with a slide that asks what video and speech

have they read in preparation for the class. Two or three students are selected for a brief question and answer time that serves as a pre-lecture icebreaker before the lecture.

Student Lead Presentation

One goal of the class is to assist students in becoming more comfortable. Intended to help students learn to manage the discomfort that they may have about talking about their political beliefs in public by teaching a speech to their classmates. Each student selects a speech on a first come basis and may use it for their speech analysis assignment. They understand that I make no judgments about their opinions or character when they choose to learn about highly controversial leaders. It is simply an opportunity to “dig deep” and learn new things. They prepare a presentation that contains the following three elements:

Part 1: Provide a brief bio on the person or background on the document. (slide 1)

Part 2: Understanding the context of the speech: (slides 2 and 3)

- What is the historical significance of the person and the speech/document?
- What were the political environment and social norms of the time?
- How did the leader frame the grievances outlined in the speech as a matter of ethics?
- What were the political demands of those who defined the grievance?
- How does the leader articulate the ethical legitimacy of the policy priorities?
- How does the speech impact the political environment of today?

Part 3: Your evaluation of the ethics of the leader's grievances: (slides 3 and 4)

- How do you feel about the way that the leader argues his or her moral position?
- Are there topics of discussion that changed your ethical values about the role of government and political activism?
- Did you learn something about a grievance that was completely new to you?
- Did the speaker say something that offended you and made you uncomfortable?
- Do you think that the leader correctly or incorrectly ethically represented the political condition or social problem that they believed was necessary to change?
- As a citizen, do you believe that this leader's positions helped or harmed “the people,” “the nation,” and “the government” that they say they are protecting?

This exercise often provides students. Students learn to find their voice on an issue that is important to them. During the presentation, they often reveal why the speech or the leader appeals to them. The assignment allows students to explore their political leanings with new material. In addition, they may use the presentation as an opportunity to discuss differences that they have had with family and friends, and during their education. Students have revealed conflicts about racial views and social policy. Women have discussed pay inequity experiences, and gender discrimination. Others have come out as queer, gay, or transgender. And, international students have shared their experiences as citizens in totalitarian states.

Midterm Essays

Students often come to class without the confidence or ability to express their opinions in writing. Several students are expected to learn how expressed that their high school teachers encouraged them to write about history and politics in a fact-based format that appears neutral. Others have only taken the minimum required hours of civics and history and focus on a math and science-intensive curriculum that have few opportunities for expressive and subjective writing. And, an increasing number of students are homeschooled and are not exposed to any of the issues that are discussed in my class. As is the intent of the *Student Lead Presentation* assignment, the midterm serves as a building block to prepare the more intensive speech analysis paper and the town hall presentation that occurs at the end of the semester. Students are directed to follow very structured guidelines to help the students think critically and concisely as they write.

The assignment is comprised of two parts. Students select one essay from a list of approximately ten op-eds. Half of the op-eds have been used over multiple semesters. These feature authors who express classic American values from liberal, centrist, and conservative perspectives. The remaining essays discuss recent controversies and topical issues that provide an opportunity to examine a current event. The assignment requires students to link points in the essay with principles outlined in Snyder's *On Tyranny* to discuss the grievances and values expressed by the author. The current second essay has focused on former Rep. Liz Cheney's (R-WY) remarks Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the United States Capitol or her concession speech for her primary election loss in 2022. In addition to the questions they must answer for the first essay, students must answer three additional questions to evaluate Cheney's remarks related to political violence and consider if they believe that there should be limits to party loyalty.

The students receive constructive feedback on their essays. Because many students do not have a fundamental grasp of citations, formatting, and grammar, I make an effort to point out where they can make improvements and how they can use the library's resources for their speech analysis paper. Additionally, they are provided with prompts for potential follow follow-up questions to strengthen arguments. I also point out how they can find additional sources to find clarity about the questions they pose. And, I will let them know where they have helped me to gain new knowledge and perspectives. If it appears that a student made an honest attempt to develop their paper but needs additional support with their writing, I will provide them with an opportunity to revise their paper for a higher grade. For instance, I have

referred students to reference librarians if they did not show an ability to properly cite their papers. Other times, students were instructed to provide additional sources or fully develop paragraphs that are one or two sentences long. Students are encouraged to use the feedback from this assignment to improve their chances of receiving a higher grade for the speech analysis paper.

Speech Analysis Paper

The students continue to develop confidence in their writing and their critical thinking skills with the speech analysis assignment. Once more, the students are provided with very structured guidelines to help the students think critically, and concisely, and apply what they have learned during the semester. The paper asks the students to link and expand on the principles of the Snyder book as well as incorporate the lessons from political leaders discussed in the Meacham book. The requirement for the student to place the speech into the historical context often leads the student to study and discover new knowledge on issues and movements that had assumed that they already had a solid grasp of the subject matter. Students are encouraged to conduct a “deep dive” of particular issues that were completely unfamiliar to them prior to their enrollment in the class. Many have stated that it has been a transformative experience because the research helps them to make connections between how issues have evolved over time. But further, why rights and social issues are never settled but require constant debate, activism, and awareness of citizens to ensure that progress and fairness can be an attainable goal for our democracy.

Students are also provided with the opportunity to provide self-reflection. Many

students discuss how they began to think differently and have a more nuanced opinion, even on issues that they support. Others have discussed how they have been impacted by the issues we discuss. For example, students who believed that there should be an absolute separation of religious and political views learned that expressions of faith helped them to have a deeper appreciation for human equality. Some found common ground in speakers whose advocacy and lived experiences initially appeared to be completely different from their own. While many students learned that it was helpful to their understanding of the world not to have an absolute good or bad view of the individual's legacy and achievements. Leaders are first and foremost human beings with political interests. This means leaders can both inspire us and disappoint us at the same time. When students understand this basic concept, they believe that they have a more realistic expectation of how much public officials can influence democracy and when citizens can intervene to protect civic processes and principles.

Town Hall

During the first few semesters that the class was offered, students were given a final exam to write essays about speeches that they did not examine in the speech analysis paper. The class was delivered as a hybrid modality due to Covid restrictions. Once the students returned in person, the syllabus was rearranged to have a town hall. It was apparent that due to their heavy course load, the students are overwhelmed by the end of the semester. The opportunity to engage in a group project with students that they have developed a rapport seems to energize the student and encourages a robust conversation.

The town hall is designed to talk about contemporary politics. Because is based on the

response to tyranny, it is essential that students discuss voting rights and the impeachment trials of former President Donald J. Trump. It became clear that many of the students had not really considered the complexity of January 6th beyond the violence on the Capitol. In other words, the students viewed the events as unique event that was unlikely to be repeated. Additionally, it was common for some of the students to view the impeachment trials as unproductive and political grandstanding. These sentiments often led to questions and comments about whether or not the reaction to January 6th was overblown. For some, it did not appear to be a partisan reaction. Rather, politics are viewed as a performance and not as a means to achieve a form of government outside of the election process. And, students were not focusing on the issues that are the root causes of tyranny such as the lack of checks and balances, accountability, and that lack of respect for the constitutional processes of governing.

Over the duration of teaching this course, it is apparent that a significant number of students often conflate the demands that elected officials tell the truth as an unnecessary personal attack on their character. There is the belief that “both sides” engage in political performances that are not legitimate. The week before the town hall, there is a discussion to help place the issues into the context of a debate about the duties and requirements of governing rather than a discussion of personal morality. Instead, students learn the meaning and significance of the oath of office. They are also introduced to James Madison's Federalist No. 51, *“The Structure of Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments.”* They also view segments of the video or the floor debate to censure Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ) after he published a video that depicted the murders of Rep. Alexandria

Ocasio Cortez (D-NY). The texts of remarks made by Representatives Ocasio Cortez, Gosar, and the then-Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) are discussed. And, the class reviews the January 2, 2021 letter from Senator Ted Cruz and eleven Republican Senators and Senators-elect to announce their decisions to formally reject the Electoral College vote on January 6th. Finally, in an effort to prepare the students with a foundation to understand why Senator James Langford (R-OK) apologized to the Black citizens of North Tulsa for signing on to Senator Cruz's letter, they watch a short video on the Tulsa Massacre of 1921 before class.

Students are randomly selected into four groups and assigned to analyze and present four speeches. The first group discusses the right to vote by discussing the perspectives of Senator Raphael Warnock's Inaugural Senate floor speech (Warnock 2021) and Senator James Langford's letter to the African American citizens of North Tulsa (Langford 2021). The second group discusses Impeachment and the responsibility of Congress to maintain the system of checks and balances. They discuss the different choices the Democratic and Republican parties made to respond to Donald Trump's abuse of power by reviewing the closing remarks that Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA) made during the first impeachment (Schiff 2020). And, they examine Sen. Mitch McConnell's (R-KY) statement after voting for Trump's acquittal at the second impeachment trial (McConnell 2021).

The students present their individual opinions as well as points of disagreement. At the conclusion of each presentation, the students on the other team pose questions and engage in a robust discussion on the topics. There is no expectation that because this is a group project students must agree on the points. The students who disagree are encouraged to discuss

why they do not share the same views. At the conclusion of the town hall, students often remark that they have a better understanding of why January 6th continues to pose a threat to American democracy.

Conclusion:

Teaching this class has been a gratifying experience. In many ways, it is a labor-intensive course. Students have the opportunity to examine a wide range of political views. Additionally, because 25% of the final grades are based on class participation, and 50% is based on intensive writing, my focus is placed on encouraging the students to engage in critical-thinking processes that are vastly different from their large lecture-based STEM classes. The students have noted during class feedback and student evaluations that they appreciate the opportunity to be exposed to a wide range of materials. They often remark how surprised they are about how little they know about the political development of the United States. They realize that they are taught about the function and structure of government but have limited knowledge about “the long game” of political interests and their ability to manipulate or influence the levers of government. Although this class requires a significant amount of prep work and time to grade long-form writing assignments, the ability to see the students increase their interest in politics and civic learning makes it worth the effort.

Partial List of Class Resources

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