# Who Am I to Say? Teaching Epistemology for Civic Engagement in Intro to American Politics

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"Who won the 2020 Presidential election? Could you confidently explain *how* you know who won to someone who supported the other candidate?" When I asked the community college students in my Introduction to American Politics course these questions, some felt that we – or at least they, as mere students – could never know who truly won. Others expressed strong convictions about the election results but could not explain *how* they knew this outcome. A few relied on misinformation to make their case. Fewer than half could clearly explain how we can claim with confidence that Joe Biden is the legitimate President of the United States.

Concerns about democratic deconsolidation in the US and beyond have spurred increased interest in cultivating students' political engagement. Meaningful participation requires not only accurate political knowledge, but also confidence in that knowledge. Uncertainty breeds inaction in the face of authoritarian ambitions and increased polarization within "siloed publics" of shared belief (Wedeen). Most of our students' information about politics will come from outside of our classrooms, sought in a limitless field of information made worse by polarizing algorithms, disinformation campaigns, and unhelpful features of human psychology. How can we help our students gain both the skills and confidence to engage as informed political actors?

This working paper presents one model for addressing this question, piloted in four Introduction to American Politics community college courses (both online and in-person). There are two main components of the model. The first is an explicit focus on epistemology – a term I use, in this context, to refer both to the conviction that there are true facts and to the methods for seeking them. After an initial unit on epistemology, students repeatedly practice fact-checking and vetting sources throughout the semester as they build skills to independently update their political knowledge. The second is a focus on "doing democracy." The course is organized around the idea that government actions depend on citizen actions, with activities that prompt students to apply information-gathering skills to engage as civic participants. The model draws on both the scholarship on teaching and learning (SoTL) related to political engagement and digital literacy, as well as findings in the "traditional" political science research on misinformation and voter competence and on polarization and civil discourse.

The paper includes a preliminary assessment of the model. Twenty-two in-person students and fifty-seven online students completed pre- and post- open-ended surveys during weeks one and twelve of the course, answering questions about their confidence in their ability to find accurate political information and their desire and ability to participate in our democracy. I also compare student reflections on their experiences in the "doing democracy" assignments from weeks eight and fifteen of the course.

The paper is intended to contribute to the growing toolkit of resources for teaching political knowledge and civic engagement that TLC conference participants might apply in their own undergraduate classrooms. The presented model can be used in either in-person or online courses, but it is particularly well-suited to students who may be adjusting to an in-person classroom environment after a remote learning experience.

**Informed, Confident, and Engaged**

Democratic erosion has sparked expanding interest in promoting political engagement. Yet misinformed political engagement is harmful rather than helpful (Hochschild and Einstein; Abrajano and Lajevardi), and identifying accurate information upon which to base one's participation is increasingly challenging. Beyond the revolutionary changes in the production and consumption of information, increased polarization and distrust can result in a world of "dueling facts" (Levendusky) for people on different sides of the partisan divide. Expressive survey responses may in fact lead political scientists to overestimate the extent to which people are misinformed (Malka and Adelman); incorrect answers may be more indicative of people's anger than their ignorance. Finally, uncertainty itself can be damaging to democracy. Anti-democratic actors need not convince citizens of their lies to demobilize resistance, but merely undermine their confidence in the truth (Wedeen). Productive political participation depends on both the accuracy of information and strength of conviction. In this challenging context, political science has increasingly embraced its role in promoting civic education. Past APSA President Rogers Smith recognized the expanded support for such initiatives as the "main positive development for our discipline in these difficult times" (Smith 22).

This paper presents one approach for cultivating informed, confident, and engaged students, with two main components. The first is a focus on "epistemology." Volumes have been written about the relationship between politics and truth, and political epistemology is a growing topic in both political science and philosophy (see for example Edenberg and Hannon). In the context of my courses, I use the term "epistemology" to refer both to the conviction that there is a "truth" that is accessible to my students and to the method for helping them seek this. When it comes to learning how to separate fact from fiction, a one-time "treatment" is insufficient. In a

recent study of students in India, an-hour long training in media literacy had no significant effect on students' ability to fetter out disinformation (Badrinathan). In my courses, building these truth-seeking skills is a semester-long activity.

The ongoing emphasis on epistemology also allows coverage of contentious political topics without resorting to "bothsideism." As civic engagement instruction has increasingly acknowledged and embraced its political nature, the potential "liberal bias" in courses becomes more concerning. One antidote is to ensure that diverse perspectives, including opposing partisan views, are presented (Harward and Shea 17). This is certainly important insofar as people can derive diverse political opinions from the same accurate information. Yet there are limits to this approach. If a professor states that Joseph Biden is the valid winner of the 2020 Presidential election and that human-induced climate change is a real and pressing problem, a student might incorrectly deduce that the professor is exhibiting a liberal bias. To disabuse a student of this belief, the professor would not then give equal coverage to the "other side" to create "balance," but rather explain the methods for knowing why each of these claims is true.

The second component is what I call "doing democracy." Many political engagement models required additional time for students and instructors (Harward and Shea 18). The approach model presented here is intended to create an experience that can be scaled up for large classes and instructors with heavy teaching loads (and without teaching assistants) and that fits within the traditional schedule of an Introduction to American Politics class.

**Epistemology**

My courses begin with a week-long Epistemology Module. There are two learning objectives for this week. The first is for students to begin to distinguish between what I call "perspectives" - beliefs, values, identities, and lived experiences, which may be distinct for each

individual, developed through personal processes of political socialization - and facts - information that can be verified as either true or not true, and on which there must be consensus for a system of shared governance and collective decision-making to function. I use interactive activities to encourage students to engage with this distinction. For example, in-person classes do a "four corners" activity where I write a series of statements on the board and students move to the corner of the room that corresponds with their views on the topic: strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Statements include both perspectives and facts (for example: Washington DC is a state; Washington DC should be a state; Residents of Washington DC pay federal taxes but have no voting representatives in Congress; Taxation without representation is undemocratic). In discussion, students reflect on the difference in the statements and relationships among them. For online classes, students read "Fact Sheets" from two different interest groups. They then separate statements that can be verified as accurate or inaccurate (for example, claims about the number of abortions performed each year) from perspectives which cannot be adjudicated using fact-checking methods (for example, statements about the sanctity of life from the moment of conception).

The second objective of the Module is for students to begin to acquire skills for evaluating the validity of factual claims, assessing the veracity of political information they might encounter online. Drawing heavily from Stanford's Civic Online Reasoning curriculum, as well as other digital literacy initiatives, I teach students to a) rely on professional fact-checking sites, understanding fact-checkers methodologies and why they might be trustworthy; and b) engage in "lateral reading" strategies, vetting online sources *before* consuming content by referencing other sources to evaluate both the claim and the source of the information (Wineburg and McGrew). For the Module's written assessment, students each find a claim about an issue

that they care about on Politifact.com that was rated false. They describe and evaluate the fact-checkers' verification methods, assessing whether they think these methods were sufficient for making the determination. In the assignment they also reflect on the ways that confirmation bias might have influenced their responses to the original claim.

Students then apply these vetting and verifying skills introduced in the Epistemology Module throughout the course. Rather than build their political knowledge primarily through specific assigned materials, the course emphasizes students' capacity to independently expand and update their knowledge of politics by accessing valid sources of online information. Textbook reading is paired down, and the memorized content students are expected to retain is minimal, focusing exclusively on what I call "Learn It, Use It" knowledge – information that I want them to truly master and keep in their long-term memory. Students then have weekly assignments to seek out specific content knowledge for themselves, with the goal of expanding their "procedural memory" (Prior and Lupia 171), building what Markus Prior and Arthur Lupia refer to as "political learning skills." For example, each week starts with "What Can You Find?" activities that require students to complete online searches related to the week's topic. Some questions are simple and non-controversial, allowing students to simply Google the correct answer. Other questions include potential misinformation that require students to reference fact-checking sites or pursue lateral reading. Students also have regular short writing assignments in which they must conduct their own research on a topic and explicitly show how they have gone through the process of vetting the sources they used.

I endeavor to practice what I preach by making transparent my processes for selecting and vetting materials assigned. I explicitly encourage them to fact-check me during class, and I suggest lateral reading on course materials. For example, in discussing the US Founding, I assign

not only material from the 1619 Project, but also various articles from historians critiquing the project (while reinforcing its importance and central claims). In supporting students in expanding their knowledge, I also embrace an approach to building political knowledge that recognizes the lived experiences of political participants, not just facts, as central to political understanding (Cramer and Toff). Research is integrated with reflection on the role of government and politics in their own lives, and observation of how it operates in the lives of others. We explore government from the bottom-up, examining its impact on students and people they care about, and working backward then to understand the process by which those impacts are generated, and can be influenced through political participation. In almost all assignments where they are seeking information, students have opportunities to explore the specific example of the political phenomenon or concept we are studying that is most relevant or interesting to them.

The focus on epistemology feeds into the second key component of the class: the ongoing process of "doing democracy."

**Doing Democracy**

Paraphrasing the late Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis, a central theme of my courses is: "Democracy is not a state, it is an act" (Lewis). I teach students to "do democracy" by encouraging them to adopt three essential democracy-sustaining habits: engage in productive conversations about politics with diverse people, vote in every election (if eligible), and regularly convey their views to their elected officials. Community college students are often balancing work and family responsibilities with school, so I advertise that they can "save democracy from your couch" by integrating these three tasks into their busy lives. This approach likely lacks the transformational effects of more "vertical" civic engagement curriculums that

involve, for example, ongoing activism around a difficult issue in partnership with a community organization (Harward and Shea 29). However, it also goes beyond the "horizontal" or "drive by" modes of participation, such as voting in a high stakes presidential election for a charismatic candidate, that do not involve sustained, genuine engagement (Harward and Shea 29). I want students to adopt democratic practices that they might maintain throughout their lives and that, if aggregated to the population level, might be enough to preserve and improve our democracy.

*Talking and Listening*

Newer scholarship has heralded the benefits of deliberative democracy activities, showing how, given certain contexts of conversation, new learning can occur and affective polarization can abate (Fishkin et al.). Political "bridging" organizations comprise a growing sector within civil society. Affective polarization can initiate and develop on college campuses (Ulbig), or students may simply shy away from controversy and withdraw from political life, prompting campus initiatives focused on cultivating space for civil disagreement. One study of colleges with unusually high rates of student political participation (as measured by student voting rates) found a trend of discussion-based classes with politically relevant content, in which students could share divergent perspectives on controversial issues in an inclusive environment (Brower and Thomas). Interestingly, accurate information was not emphasized in many examples of constructive dialogue. For example, in the multi-campus study of discussion-based classes above, they mention that "the goal [in the discussions] is to present all perspectives but insist they are based on evidence, not opinion" (Brower and Thomas 29), but they do not elaborate on how students were trained to access and present valid evidence, or to question evidence presented by others. Having a shared method for evaluating information, and the habit

of regularly asking colleagues (and instructors) “How do you know what you know?” seems an important component of productive civil disagreement.

My community college students are diverse by many metrics – age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, country of origin, ideological orientation – creating the potential for dialogue across very different worldviews. Deliberative processes are introduced during the Epistemology Module, with the recognition that varied perspectives derive from diverse processes of political socialization. Students do paired interviews with colleagues about the most influential factors or experiences shaping their political perspectives, following guidelines for deep listening. Throughout the course, students then have repeated opportunities to share perspectives using the dialogue and listening techniques introduced in the Epistemology Module. Each in-person class begins with two-minute interviews, with topics related to the week’s theme and becoming increasingly controversial as the course advances. In another iteration of the four corners exercise described above, I write statements about current political topics. After moving to different corners of the room, students pair up with someone who chose a different corner and interview that person about the origins of the underlying perspectives that shape these views, as well as the source of any facts which shape their opinions. In online courses, discussion boards serve as the forum for these kinds of exchanges.

Building successful strategies for nurturing fact-based civil disagreement is a work in progress. Particularly coming back from online learning environments, students experience social anxiety when interacting with peers about even non-controversial issues. Given the potential of having to cite a source of information, they may simply withhold their comment. Online Discussion boards present different challenges, in part because it is harder to immediately respond to students who are not following established criteria for dialogue.

*Voting*

Initiatives abound to encourage college students to register and vote. On the first day of class, I have students in groups construct an argument for why they should *not* vote. They generate compelling reasons, with which I heartily agree – "There is virtually no chance your vote will influence the outcome of an election." This discussion becomes the introduction to the concept of collective action problems.

One study found instructor dissemination of voter registration information to be far more effective than any mailed or online efforts (Bennion and Nickerson). I pursue a variation on this approach. In one of the "What Can You Find?" tasks of the semester students must demonstrate that they know how to register to vote online, walking through the process on the Secretary of State website. Students obviously are not required to register (and many are not eligible), but they receive credit for answering specific questions indicating they have found the correct site and clicked through the steps. Many spontaneously report that they decided to register as they were completing the assignment. In election years, students also report on what they can find about the process of voting - options for returning ballots, where polling stations are located, etc. - and relate their views on voting to the collective action problem introduced in our initial discussion. In in-person and online classes, this often generates a discussion of students' actual experiences voting in that election.

*Calling*

Most people – even those who are politically knowledgeable and engaged – do not regularly call their representatives (do you?). Students are invited to call their national representatives during week eight of the class and their state representatives during week fifteen. For both assignments, students conduct preliminary research before making the call. They review

their Member of Congress's website to find statements about an issue that the student cares about, and they then fact check the statement. Students also compare Members' asserted positions to their voting history on recent bills. For their state representatives, students also review, and fact check, issue statements by their representatives. They then evaluate the allocation of funds for programs or policies related to those issues in the state budget. Before asking students to call, I demonstrate how it works during class, calling my member of Congress on speaker on my cell phone. Students are often surprised when someone picks up and we have an unscripted conversation in which I ask the staffer to describe the system by which constituent messages are recorded, tallied, and conveyed to the representative. Students do not receive points for making the phone call and are explicitly told they are not required to call. They receive credit for reflecting on how the experience of calling – or the decision not to call – felt for them.

I encourage students to call, rather than email, their representatives for three reasons. Firstly, a 30-second phone is as effective as an email that might take at least a few minutes to compose.[1] Mass emails are ignored altogether. I invite my students to add their representatives to their phone contact lists so they can make a regular habit of calling them on the fly. Second, if students call during business hours, they are likely to talk to a staffer. This real-time interaction with someone (usually a young person) sitting in the office of an elected official can make government feel more concrete and accessible.

Most importantly, my explicit goal is to help students develop confidence in their political knowledge – acquired through their online searches or as part of their lived experiences. Most students find it more intimidating to call than to email. They worry that they are wasting

[1] I have not yet read the scholarly literature comparing modes of constituent communication. This is my assessment based on my experiences as a Legislative Assistant for a Member of Congress, reinforced by the observations of other staffers as recorded in the 2017 guide *Indivisible: A Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda.*

their representative's time or that they will sound unintelligent. I push them to confront and, hopefully, overcome this feeling, assuming their power as people who pay the salaries of the individuals whose job is to represent them. For students who suffer social anxiety, I suggest calling after hours to ensure their call will go directly to voicemail and leaving a "one-breath comment" - a short statement that they can say without taking a breath (which is when their nervous voice might break).

**Evaluating Results**

Consistent with many evaluations of civic engagement curriculum, I have preliminarily assessed shifts in student attitudes, knowledge, and skills based on students' self-reported determinations.

*Pre- and Post- Surveys*

In week one of my courses and again in week twelve, I distributed a four-question open-ended survey asking about students' valuing of democracy, confidence in their ability to gather accurate political information, basic understanding of government decision-making procedures, and desire/skills to participate in democracy. Twenty-two students responded to both the pre- and post- surveys in the in-person class. These surveys were administered in paper form, so all students present on those days responded. In the online classes, fifty-eight students responded to both the pre- and post- surveys. Results should be taken with a grain of salt. The method for distributing the online surveys produced a biased sample, as it required students to download, fill, and re-upload a file, which is an IT skill some students lacked (a couple of students emailed saying they could not do this; others may have simply opted not to try). Surveys were not anonymous, meaning students may have been likely to respond with what they thought I, the instructor, wanted to hear.

Here, I will focus on in-person responses to the question about confidence in acquiring political information and skills/desire to participate [as I revise this draft paper I am still analyzing the online results]. In the in-person class, fourteen students reported an increase in their confidence in the post- surveys. Eight students expressed no change in confidence. Six of those students indicated in both their pre- and post- surveys that they felt very confident. The other two expressed a lack of confidence in both pre- and post- surveys that did not change.

Among students who reported a shift in confidence, various students specifically describing the new skills or resources they had developed or discovered during the course.

> **Example 1 Pre:** *I don't have much confidence in my ability to independently find truthful information relating to government and politics. This is due to the fact that I do not immerse myself in the world of politics. I hear about politics, and it is not a topic I like to discuss. It often brings me anxiety, since I do not understand much about it. I hope to learn more so I can make a change in my community.*
>
> **Example 1 Post:** *I feel incredibly assured that I can find reliable information independently. I also have gained tools in this course that will assist me throughout my academic career.*

In noting changes in their ability to discern truthful information about politics online, some student responses indicated that they were less cynical or prone to avoid political discourse.

> **Example 2 Pre:** *I am staying away from politics discussions as I do not support any of the parties involved nor do I enjoy the heated debates. I would rate my confidence to 0 because I do not even watch the news to avoid being "manipulated" by different channels. It is difficult to find unbiased sources of information.*
>
> **Example 2 Post:** *Learning about Politifact was so useful! At the beginning of the semester, I had no idea that there is such a great resource online for checking the veracity of information circulating online about government and politics. I am very skeptical about news or social media sources as I consider them biased, but now, my research skills have improved and Politifact is a new bookmark on my browser.*
>
> **Example 3 Pre:** *I honestly think I can find truthful information but I am not interested in seeking it out. I think most stuff is very opinionated and therefore I choose to avoid politics in general.*

> **Example 3 Post:** *I still think I could improve on finding more trustworthy sources but I am a lot better and confident than before. I now know of some good fact checking websites to see what is true.*

Among in-person students, twenty students reported an increase in their ability or desire to participate politically. Many of these students noted that they had voted in previous elections but did not realize that they could call their elected representatives. Some also noted changes in their sense of responsibility to participate. Two students reported no change.

*Student Reflections in Week 8 and Week 15 Call Your Representative Activities*

The second mode of evaluation is to compare student reflections on their experiences calling their representatives in weeks eight and fifteen of the course. The responses shared here are from online students. For the assignment in week fifteen, students were not specifically asked to compare with their week eight experience, but many spontaneously did.

In many cases, students commented on an increase in confidence from the first assignment to the second.

> **Example 1 Week 8:** *I wasn't able to call because phone calls scare me. I was scared that the person on the phone would try to ask me questions. If I'm not completely prepared for a phone call then I get anxious.*

> **Example 1 Week 15:** *I called my State Senator, Richard Pan. I was sent to voicemail but left a message. Last time we were assigned to call I was very nervous to speak. This time however, I decided communicating the importance of [my issue] was greater than fear. I will make more of an effort to speak up about my opinions.*

> **Example 2 Week 8:** *I did not call Ami Bera. I find it hard to talk to people on the phone, especially someone of importance. I found it hard because I would not know what to say.*

> **Example 2 Week 15:** *This was an interesting experience. The last time we were asked to call, I was too nervous to call. This time I did. I left a message using the one breath comment technique. I was nervous this time as well but I am glad I got to leave a voicemail.*

Some students also indicated an increase in feelings of political efficacy from the first call to the second.

> **Example 3 Week 8:** *I did not call my Congressman. I don't support my congressman and it would have been really uncomfortable to make that phone call. I'm not very direct or involved with my political standings either so it would've been an awkward and unnatural thing for me to do.*
>
> **Example 3 Week 15:** *No one answered when I called my representative. It was an awkward experience but other than that I feel like if enough people were more inclined to voice the change they want to see our representatives make it would probably pressure them into doing it.*
>
> **Example 4 Week 8:** *For me, calling my representative feels like a hard thing to do because I can't really think of any issues to urge him to look into. I am also introverted so I did not want to.*
>
> **Example 4 Week 15:** *Normally, I would have left an email but I decided to actually call this time. I did end up leaving a message. However, it felt weirdly empowering to be like, "Hey, please look into this, we need this thing right here."*

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented one potential model for helping cultivate politically informed, confident, and engaged students given the current challenges in the context of our eroding democracy. There are two basic ideas that inform this teaching approach.

The first is that, in a world where access to virtually unlimited information (and misinformation) is literally at our students' fingertips, we should primarily be teaching them how to independently expand and update their political knowledge. Rather than assigning dense textbooks that spoon-feed students details and examples, we might offer them "learn it use it" knowledge of the basic framework of government and politics and then guide them in acquiring the rest of the information themselves. Separating fact from fiction online requires continued practice – as it turns out, even elite students and historians struggle with this task (Wineburg and

McGrew), and one-time skills-building sessions are shown to have no effect (Badrinathan). A semester-long Introduction to American Politics course offers, for some of our students (who might never again take a similar class), literally a once in a lifetime opportunity to train in this essential skill. Students also must have enough confidence in their fact-finding abilities to feel emboldened to act on this knowledge. Moreover, in an era of increasing partisan polarization and distrust in "liberal" academia, we as instructors should also be explicit about "how we know what we know," treading boldly with our students in politically relevant and controversial topics because we can make transparent the "science" behind evaluating the veracity of claims.

The second idea is that, in every political science course (or college course, for that matter), students need to be taught essential and sustainable habits in "doing democracy" through active participation based on the knowledge they acquire. If, beyond learning to vet and verify political information, the American population had the habit of engaging in productive dialogue across differences, voting in every election, and regularly calling their representatives at all levels of government, our democratic prospects would look far more hopeful. These are thus the minimal, but perhaps sufficient, civic practices I emphasize in my courses, offering students repeated opportunities to engage in two out of the three tasks.

The model presented here was developed with community college students in California – a group of individuals who are often unlike the "typical" college students one pictures on four-year campuses. This may be of value as we think about the broader goal of cultivating a mass public capable of sustaining democracy. As compared to many institutions of higher education, the diversity of ages, backgrounds, and viewpoints of my students more closely approximates the variation of the American population, making community colleges a good testing ground for not

only curricular and pedagogical approaches developed in other classrooms, but also for interventions applied among research subjects in the traditional political science scholarship. As a colleague once said to me, we teach "the people." Community college students are also more likely to be juggling demands of adult life with schooling, and instructors are often juggling hundreds of students with no teaching assistants, creating challenges for pursuing the more time-intensive "vertical" political engagement approaches that have generated positive results on many campuses. The community college context requires a model of political engagement that can be implemented "at scale" by instructors, and that students can pursue with a full schedule of other responsibilities – but that we thus might hope students could sustain over the long run.

The model is very much a work in progress, and the method of evaluation was preliminary. Student surveys from these pilot efforts are primarily helpful for designing a more rigorous assessment of outcomes in terms of both student experiences and gained knowledge/skills. I also plan to develop a longitudinal study to evaluate whether students retain over time the skills, knowledge, and habits they might have acquired during the semester-long course. Despite these limitations, students' self-reported changes seem indication enough that the approach generated some of the intended effects and is worth further developing. They are at least enough to keep me at it for another round, trying to better support my students in becoming the kinds of well-informed, confident, political participants that our democracy sorely needs.

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