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Title:

Pedagogy in an Era of Escalating Political Violence

Abstract

After the January 6th insurrection in 2021, violent political incidents have increased in American politics (Kalmoe and Lilliana, 2022; Kleinfeld, 2021; Piazza 2024). Moreover, the effect of violent politics on many marginalized groups, including Black women and members of the LGBTQIA community, is magnified, as they are more apt to be the target of violent rhetoric and attacks (Thompson, Beveridge, and McCabe, et al, 2024; Krook, 2020). Political science professors, especially those who encourage students to actively participate in political activity, cannot overlook the negative effects this escalation in violent politics is likely to have on our students. They should modify their pedagogy in response to the current political environment and in response to students' lived experiences and needs (Poloni-Staudinger and Strachan, 2020). These lived experiences affect how students intake new information, their comfort in the classroom, and their safety in undertaking experiential learning in political settings. This paper explores the possibility of three approaches that may be able to help students thrive despite an escalation in political violence, including encouraging civic engagement (Strachan, 2015), using praxis in the classroom (Freire, 1968), and educating for hope (Giroux, 2023). The question remains, however, with the rise of polarization and political violence will these be enough to encourage students to engage, educate them to be informed citizens, and protect them in experiential learning beyond campus?

Introduction

After the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a rise in political violence in the United States culminating in the January 6th insurrection. Polarization and negative partisanship have exacerbated political violence. Political Science pedagogy can not overlook the effect this escalation of political violence is having on students' ability to participate in political science classrooms. Although there has not been research done on the effects of political violence on students' ability to learn political science we must start considering the effect this phenomenon is having on our students. Students' intersectional identities and lived experiences affect their comfort in the classroom, and their safety in undertaking experiential learning in political settings.

Therefore political science professors should consider adjusting their pedagogy to account for the rise of political violence. Three approaches should be considered as methods that will help students thrive despite an escalation in political violence: encouraging civic engagement (Strachan, 2015), using praxis in the classroom (Freire, 1968), and giving students educated hope (Giroux, 2023).

Political Violence Overview

Since the 2020 election, the United States has seen a dramatic rise in political violence. Political violence is a myriad of actions with the express purpose of causing harm to individuals, groups, or places with the intention of serving a political goal. These harms may be physical, psychological, or symbolic (Bosi and Malthaner, 2015, 439). Some predominate examples of political violence post-2020 are the January 6th insurrection, the plot to kidnapping of Michigan Governor, Gretchen Whitmer, and the increase of death and rape threats to public officials¹. In

¹ Violence is systemic and extends beyond direct attacks and threats, but for the purposes of this paper, we will stay focused on direct attacks of political violence.

addition to instances of political violence becoming more prevalent, fringe ideologies and groups have gained mainstream popularity on the internet (Kleinfeld, 2021). There are two key views on violence, the first being the minimalist approach which looks at violence as a force, while the comprehensive approach views violence as a violation (Bufacchi, 2005). Both views are useful, but to acknowledge how violence is more damaging than the direct act of violence we will use the comprehensive approach. Viewing violence as a violation is a way to acknowledge the effects on the victim, family, and community after the act of initial violence (Krook, 2020). Therefore the comprehensive approach to understanding violence is suitable for understanding how political violence affects students. This encompasses the full effect violence has on students' ability to learn and their experiences within and outside of the classroom.

Effects of Violent Politics on Marginalized Groups

Political violence against marginalized peoples has the goal of dissuading marginalized people from being politically active. Even if political violence against a marginalized group does not have the explicit goal of targeting someone for their marginalized identity, the marginalized identity can impact the interpretation of the violence. For example, no matter the motivation of a hegemonic man committing political violence against a woman or queer person, if the impact of the violence is gendered then it will affect how women and queer people view their role in politics and the risk associated with it (Bardall et. al., 2019).

The United States' history is inseparable from political violence. First, the land that the United States is on was gained from the political violence of forcibly removing Indigenous Americans from their lands and mass killings of Indigenous peoples within the United States (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, Kalmoe and Lilliana, 2022, 12). Secondly, the United States has a history

of racialized political violence from slavery, to political violence within the reconstruction era to the Jim Crow South, lynchings, and the violent expelling of black Americans to create sundown towns (Loewen, 2018, Kalmoe and Lilliana, 2022, 13).

Even after the civil rights movement, Black Americans still face political violence. Black Americans face physical political violence in the form of racist hate crimes. An example of this is mass shootings perpetrated by white Americans toward groups of Black Americans. An example of this is the Charleston church massacre, where nine churchgoers were killed in a historically black church. The shooter wrote that Black people were taking over the United States and called for a return to segregation (Thompson, Beveridge, and McCabe, et al, 2024).

Many Black politicians are faced with semiotic violence in the form of racist comments and harassment as they run for office or while they are in office. A prominent example is the attacks Kamala Harris received online during her 2024 presidential campaign. Because of her intersectional identity as a Black woman, she faces both sexist and racist attacks. Some comments made were, that she is, “a disaster whose only qualifications was having a vagina and the right skin color. She’s a DEI hire, right? ... She’s a woman! She’s colored! Therefore, she’s got to be good.”, “Crazy Kamala says she’s Indian, not Black”, claiming she is lying about being Black, as well as rape and death threats (Wootson and Knowles. 2024). Criticisms towards Harris focused on her identity as a woman and person of color. This works to silence other people with the same marginalized identities and reinforce racial and gender hierarchies to establish who should and should not participate in politics.

Furthermore, racism has led to non-violent civil rights movements and Black Lives Matter protests being portrayed as violent. Fox News used old footage of violence to spread a narrative that Black Lives Matter protests were violent when the event in question was

completely peaceful (Kalmoe and Lilliana, 2022, 166). Not only does misinterpretation of Black civil disobedience work to portray Black Politics as inherently violent, but it can also lead to a backlash of racist political violence. For instance, the political violence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Fabricated stories of Black men perpetrating sexual violence against white women led to racial killings and lynchings of Black men. The motivation for the political violence of the KKK was to instill fear within the Black community and dissuade Black families from moving to white neighborhoods (Loewen, 2018, pg 149). Hence, political violence against marginalized groups has the intent of dissuading marginalized groups from participating in politics.

Violence against women in politics is a global problem that hinders women from safe and free participation in politics. There are different types of violence that women face in politics that include but are not limited to, physical violence, psychological violence, and sexual violence. The goal of political violence against women is to use gendered attacks to dissuade women's political participation to preserve gendered hierarchies and undermine democracy (Krook, 2017). An example of this political violence is the psychological violence of rape threats against women in office.

Moreover, the 2016 presidential election showed the semiotic violence that women face even at the national level. Semiotic violence is when sexist language and images are used to render women incompetent for political office and reinforce gender hysteries (Krook, 2020). In 2016 Trump supporters sold merchandise with the slogans such as, “Trump That Bitch” (Bellstrom, 2016) or “Life’s a bitch, don’t vote for one” (Crockett, 2016). The purpose of these slogans is to use violent gendered language to disqualify Clinton and to establish that women in political positions are “bitches”, discouraging women from entering the political sphere. Such

semiotic violence has persisted in American politics but has become more prominent with the rise of deepfakes. Deepfakes of Nancy Pelosi have been made to create videos of her seeming drunk to discredit her (Warzel, 2019). Deepfakes have also been used as sexual violence against women in public office. In Florida, a young woman named Sabrina Javellana was elected to a seat on the Hallandale Beach City Commission. After she took office she received violent threats online until it escalated to fake nude images of her being shared online, accompanied by messages of violent sexual harassment (Kraft, 2024). The threat of having fake nude images shared online discourages women who have political ambitions from running for office or participating in civic and political life. Javellana stepped down from office and has not run since.

LGBTQIA Americans are faced with political violence that works to dissuade their participation in politics. As of 2023, the FBI found, “[a] total of 2,077 reported incidents were based on sexual orientation. Of these, nearly half (49.9%) were directed against gay men. 492 incidents based on gender identity were reported, with the majority (355) directed against transgender individuals” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2024). LGBTQIA politicians face attacks on their sexual and gender identities. For example, a gay man running for city council in Dallas received harassment online, which referred to him as “jock strap Chad”, and crudely commented about him receiving enemas (Taffet, 2025). Homophobic and transphobic harassment affects more than the individual they are against, they affect the whole community. Thus members of the LGBTQIA community know that in order to participate in politics they will face homophobia or transphobia.

Solutions

Civic Engagement

Encouraging civic engagement is a way to give power back to the students in times of political violence. Service learning is the linking of what students learn in the classroom to broader experiences in their communities (Strachan, 2015). By connecting students to civic engagement within their communities we are giving them the autonomy to engage positively with politics. When we make it our mission to instill civic engagement in our students, students can create a culture where being civically engaged is normal and is expected of one from their community.

Moreover, service learning helps students engage in campus and community outside of the classroom. This continued civic engagement helps students have the resources to continue their education in the face of microaggressions (*ibid.*). This civic involvement will continue to help students in the face of political violence. Therefore students will feel politically empowered and have a framework of how to engage with politics outside of political violence. Beyond service learning, civic engagement pedagogy seeks to teach not only political knowledge but also the civic skills and dispositions that result in higher levels of civic and political participation (Rios, Bennion, and Simpson, 2013).

Service learning will give students civic skills that they can use to become civically and politically involved. These skills allow students to register and mobilize voters, as well as organize protests. However, these skills may not be the most successful for combating political violence. Even so, civic skills will give students autonomy to work toward the political change they want to see. Furthermore, civic engagement pedagogy has a history of not being intersectional and instead searches for one answer. Students with different intersectional

identities and lived experiences will have different comfort levels engaging in community-facing assignments. Moreover, without an intersectional approach, instructors' internal biases will be passed onto students; students with marginalized identities will internalize that there is not a place at the table for them (Poloni-Staudinger and Strachan, 2020). But with knowledge only and no civic and political skills, students will not have the resources to fully engage in their democracy and advocate against oppression. Thus civic engagement pedagogy should be implemented with an intersectional lens. This looks like taking into account that marginalized groups experience college and politics differently and then curating service projects to address their needs and concerns (*ibid.*).

A civic engagement assignment that can help students utilize their civic skills in the face of political violence is to have students create solutions or safety plans for a marginalized group against a specific category of political violence and how it could be implemented. Mona Krook demonstrates how this will look in her book *Violence Against Women in Politics*. At the end of each chapter that focuses on a type of political violence, she provides solutions to protect women who face this violence. An example that Krook gives for sexual violence that women face in politics is to have listening sessions. These listening sessions allow women to share their experiences as well as the solutions they would like to see for sexual violence in politics (Krook, 2020, pg. 167). When students create their own solutions they will have to examine the problem, create a solution, and then determine what political or civic actions would be necessary to implement their solutions. This allows students a deeper understanding of political violence while, they cultivate civic skills.

Praxis

Teaching with praxis will allow students to engage with their education in a way that involves them as participants rather than consumers of knowledge. Praxis is action and reflection used together to critically reflect on and transform the environment (Freire, 1968). When the teacher becomes the subject and the student the object, students no longer fully participate in the learning process. Thus, they do not connect their lived experiences to political science. When educators use what Freire deems the “banking” concept of education students only learn to repeat. This stops deep learning and creates a barrier between political science theory and students' lived experiences. This barrier prevents students from bringing their experiences to the classroom and their education to experiences with political violence. Creating barriers to students bringing their lived experiences into the classroom is a hindrance to the political science discipline. This contributes to students' apathy because they internalize that they are the object and thus know nothing.

Using praxis will allow students to learn the material while giving them the ability to use the classroom to reflect on their position in society and the problems that burden them. When students see the classroom as a place where they are participators they will then see political science as a resource they can use to stand against political violence. This will give students autonomy and encourage their participation in service learning, civic engagement, and participation in the classroom.

By incorporating students into dialogues within the classroom, they transition from being passive recipients to active participants in the construction of knowledge and the process of naming. Students arrive in the classroom with lived experiences that enrich their understanding of the cultural context and its connection to political violence. Consequently, when students

experience this autonomy, they become unencumbered by the banking model of education, allowing them to leverage their lived experiences to engage with the field of political science and develop a more profound comprehension of the subject matter.

While through praxis students are able to identify how current structures oppress them, through praxis they are not given the political and civic skills to make change. With only the knowledge of oppression and no action, students may fall apathetic and not participate in civic and political life. Moreover, students having knowledge of the problem without the goal of positive change may feel like there is no possibility of change and become cynical to progress and stuck in the position they inhabit. Knowledge alone is not enough to help students face political violence.

Praxis can be implemented in the classroom on a regular basis. When lecturing, one can use the time as a guided conversation, encouraging students to share their lived experiences. This allows students to deepen their understanding of the class materials and become active participants in their learning. Another assignment that one can implement is to have students apply class materials to their lives and come prepared for class dialogue, where they can share their analysis and learn from one another.

Educated Hope

Being surrounded by political violence can lead to students' apathy and an unwillingness to get engaged in politics. Thus teaching students educated hope gives them the framework to think of a brighter future in the face of political violence, According to Henry Giroux in his work on pedagogy in a Fascist world, “educators should create the conditions that enable young people to view cynicism as unconvincing and hope practical” (Giroux, 2023). Hope allows students to imagine a future they can create despite the ongoing political violence. Educated hope is based

on the foundation of critique of the status quo with the goal of making a change in politics or society at large. Furthermore, including hope in political science pedagogy grounds hope in theory, making it tangible to students (*ibid.*) By not ignoring political violence and inequalities within the classroom students will have the opportunity to engage with barriers they face in their lives and gain the knowledge to make concert critiques and changes. (Giroux, 2004). Without hope, students have little motivation to use the skills that they develop within the framework of service learning and praxis.

Being hopeful of a brighter future without necessary actions is only beneficial on an individual level. Without action, hope pacifies one's cynicism without making societal or structural change. Thus the hope becomes self-serving and no longer a catalyst of change. But still, hope is a vital function of progress, since without hope one lacks motivation for action. The cynic has little motivation to use civic and political skills to change oppression since they believe that it will do little to nothing.

An educated hope assignment can involve students using class materials to find a solution to a current political issue. For example, if students are learning about political violence, they may be assigned to draft legislation to combat it. This assignment will give students the opportunity to see how government and politics have the power to create a brighter future.

Pedagogical Solution

None of these solutions by itself will be enough to combat the rise in political violence that surrounds the life of political science students. Therefore a combination of the three is the recommended solution. To bring all three together one must first start with using praxis in the classroom. This will allow students to identify oppression and begin to name the problem. After students have identified oppression, educators should use political science theories and

knowledge to help students imagine a brighter future. This will prevent students from falling into the trap of cynicism and stop their development at only knowing the problem. Once students are motivated by the knowledge of oppression and the educated hope to make change, they will be more active and gain more from service learning experiences. Thus, praxis is the foundation of understanding oppressions that underline political violence, educated hope is the motivation to seek change in spite of political violence and service learning gives students civic skills and experiences to make actionable changes. These solutions do not have to happen in succession, assignments may layer the skills to utilize multiple at the same time.

An example of how to implement these three practices together is a servicing learning project with community leaders. Students can work with a community that they belong to, and have dialogues with community leaders to identify an oppression or injustice that faces the community. After the inequality is established students then use their class materials to find concrete ways they could make progress for a brighter future within the community. Students will leave this project with learned civic skills, and the motivation to use the civic skills they gained after their time in higher education. Furthermore, when students connect their coursework to their work with community leaders, they will have a deeper understanding of the course materials.

Conclusion

In conclusion teaching with service learning, praxis, and educated hope will put the power back into the student's hands. Students have intersectional identities and are subjected to messages that marginalized groups should not participate in politics. Political violence does not only affect the immediate victim; it affects the family and community as well. Changing the culture in the classroom will give students the skills to positively participate in politics. Instead

of being paralyzed by the threats of political violence, students will have the skills to get involved in politics and civic life.

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