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Teaching Polarization and Populism through Active Learning: A Classroom Experiment

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I. The Challenge of Teaching Controversial Political Phenomena

In an era of increasing political polarization, educators face a significant challenge when teaching contentious political concepts such as populism. As polarization deepens, students often enter the classroom with strongly held ideological perspectives, shaped by personal beliefs, media exposure, and partisan discourse. These preconceptions can hinder their ability to engage with political concepts objectively and critically.

As a political science professor, I cannot ignore the centrality of populism and polarization in contemporary political discourse. However, simply presenting students with definitions and theoretical frameworks is not enough to counter the deeply ingrained biases that shape their initial perceptions of these topics. If students view populism only through their ideological lenses, they risk misinterpreting its broader significance and variation across global contexts.

This raises a critical pedagogical question: **How can we teach populism in a way that encourages objective, analytical engagement rather than ideological entrenchment?** More broadly, how can educators create learning environments where students feel intellectually challenged yet not personally attacked when engaging with politically sensitive material? To address these challenges, I designed my populism course with a strong emphasis on active learning, enabling students to directly engage with populist discourse in a structured and interactive manner.

II. Case Study: Teaching Populism in Class

Last semester, I taught a course on populism at *Mount St. Mary's University* with the primary goal of ensuring that students developed a nuanced and evidence-based understanding of populism. Rather than allowing students to approach populism through preconceived ideological biases, I sought to cultivate an environment where they could critically analyze populism's diverse manifestations without resorting to simplistic left-right dichotomies.

To achieve this, I implemented a series of structured learning activities, gradually building students' ability to classify and analyze populist rhetoric. One of the most effective pedagogical tools I employed was active learning, which placed students in the role of researchers, forcing them to grapple with real-world political speeches and classify them based on empirical criteria.

Through this process, students not only deepened their conceptual understanding of populism but also developed key analytical skills, such as critical thinking, comparative analysis, and argumentation. This approach bridged the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, ensuring that students were not merely memorizing definitions but actively engaging with populism as a political phenomenon.

III. Implementing Active Learning in Populism Education

A cornerstone of my course was a highly interactive classroom exercise titled **“Is This Populism?”** This game served as an applied learning tool that encouraged students to move beyond abstract discussions and directly classify populist rhetoric based on theoretical criteria.

Pre-Game Preparation: Building Analytical Skills

Before participating in the game, students underwent an intensive one-to-two-week learning period focused on:

1. **Understanding the definitions and core characteristics of populism—**
Students explored both **academic debates** and empirical approaches to

defining populism, drawing from literature on populist discourse, ideology, and political strategy.

2. **Learning how populism is measured**—Students engaged with methodologies used in populism classification research, examining how political speeches are coded based on key populist themes (e.g., anti-elitism, people-centrism, and exclusionary rhetoric).
3. **Training in coding populist rhetoric**—Students completed a structured coding workshop, using materials adapted from a research project that classified populist speeches globally. These materials mirrored the training that research coders receive in empirical populism studies, providing students with firsthand experience in applying analytical frameworks to real political speeches.

By the time students participated in the game, they were well-equipped to engage with populist rhetoric at a sophisticated level, having moved beyond passive learning (lectures and readings) to active data analysis and classification.

The “Is This Populism?” Game: A 4x4 Bingo Challenge

The game itself took the form of a **4x4 bingo activity**, where each square represented a different subtype of populism, such as:

- Nationalist populism
- Security populism
- Religious populism
- Economic populism
- Immigration populism

Students analyzed 20 political speeches from global populist leaders, each representing different national and ideological contexts. Their task was to classify each leader’s rhetoric into one of the bingo categories.

What made this exercise particularly effective was that students did not merely classify speeches in isolation—they were required to publicly justify their classifications and engage in discussions with their peers. This peer interaction element transformed the game from a simple classification task into an active

learning experience, where students learned not only from their own analysis but also from the arguments and perspectives of their classmates.

IV. Beyond Ideology: Focusing on Populism's Conceptual Dimensions

A major pedagogical advantage of this activity was that it compelled students to transcend ideological divides. Instead of evaluating whether they agreed or disagreed with a particular leader's rhetoric, they focused on classifying the rhetorical style and thematic elements. This approach helped students view populism as a complex and diverse phenomenon, rather than as a label for political figures they personally support or oppose.

To maintain objectivity and minimize ideological bias, I made two key instructional decisions:

1. I excluded contemporary U.S. political figures (e.g., Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders). Given the strong partisan reactions these figures elicit, their inclusion could have hindered students' ability to engage with the material analytically rather than emotionally.
2. I prioritized multilingual speeches with available subtitles, ensuring accessibility and exposing students to a diverse range of populist rhetoric from around the world.

V. Outcomes and Implications

The results of this exercise were **highly encouraging**:

- Students offered diverse interpretations of certain leaders, leading to productive debates. These discussions required them to articulate their reasoning, engage in comparative analysis, and defend their classifications with evidence.

- Despite analyzing a large volume of speeches (20 in total), students did not find the exercise monotonous. Instead, the gamified structure kept them actively engaged and motivated.
- The activity enhanced students' analytical precision, as they became more attuned to subtle variations in populist rhetoric across different leaders and countries.
- Students developed a broader, global perspective on populism, recognizing how it manifests differently across political systems, cultures, and ideological spectrums.

By structuring populism education around interactive, applied learning, students were able to engage with a highly polarized political concept without reinforcing ideological divides. This game-based approach fostered both conceptual clarity and critical thinking, equipping students with the tools to analyze populist discourse systematically rather than emotionally.

VI. Open Questions for Further Discussion

While this exercise proved effective, it also raises broader pedagogical questions:

1. **Beyond this activity, what other interactive strategies could educators employ to teach contentious political concepts in an engaging yet rigorous manner?**
2. **If an instructor were to include U.S. cases in an American politics course, what strategies could be used to ensure a balanced discussion? How should educators approach these topics without reinforcing ideological polarization?**

By sharing this classroom experiment, I aim to contribute to a broader conversation on best practices for teaching contentious political concepts. Active learning approaches, such as the “Is This Populism?” game, demonstrate how structured engagement can enable students to critically analyze political rhetoric without defaulting to partisan interpretations. However, there remains ample room for discussion on how educators can further refine such methods to navigate the challenges of teaching politically charged topics in an era of deepening polarization.