



# F P S A

## Florida Political Science Association

# THE POLITICAL SCIENTIST

## Newsletter of the Florida Political Science Association

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## A Message from the Editor

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Since 2016, I have had the privilege of serving as the organizer and chair of the Roundtable on Teaching Political Science at the annual meeting of the Florida Political Science Association. On this roundtable, faculty from various institutions gather to discuss the innovative pedagogical techniques we employ in our teaching, ask for input on the challenges we face in the classroom, and consider how current events impact our teaching. Following this year's panel, editor Denis Rey invited me to serve as the guest editor for this issue of *The Political Scientist*. In the issue, we feature five essays on pedagogy authored by faculty members who teach at Florida institutions. Each essay serves as a personal narrative, where the author reflects upon a successful aspect of his or her

teaching; the essays also seek to provide a roadmap for faculty and instructors seeking to adopt these approaches to course development, academic program design, and student skill development.

In the first essay, Giselle Jamison from St. Thomas University considers the critical issue of maintaining civility in the classroom. In her essay, she outlines how we can simultaneously engage students in the discussion of contentious political issues, while also encouraging them to be respectful of views of those with whom they may vehemently disagree.

In the next essay, Denis Rey from the University of Tampa chronicles how he and his colleagues developed a successful program to foster undergraduate research. His department's approach has resulted in numerous presentation and publication opportunities for its students, as well as several "best paper" awards.

The third essay, by Zach Baumann from Florida Southern College, describes how he incorporates survey research into his classes. He serves as director of FSC's Center for Polling and Policy Research, and explains how students can be involved in all part of the process; this includes designing surveys, working as call room interviewers, and ultimately, interpreting and disseminating the results.

The final two essays reflect on the design of specific courses. In the fourth essay, Austin Trantham from Jacksonville University considers the value of "special topics" courses in a Political Science program. He discusses two such courses he has designed and taught and offers tips for faculty seeking to develop special topics courses of their own.

In the final essay, I discuss the structure and content of my Introduction to International Relations course. I teach this course each fall, and I offer sample assignments for instructors who, like me, seek to use International Relations theory to help first-year students make sense of the complex and sometimes confusing arena of global politics.

It is my hope that these essays provide useful to both seasoned faculty as well as those who are new to teaching. At the upcoming meeting of the FPSA, to be held on April 4, 2020 at Stetson University in Deland, FL, the Teaching Roundtable will continue its discussion of pedagogy, as we seek to help our undergraduate students develop as scholars and citizens. We hope to see you there!

Kelly McHugh, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Political Science, Florida Southern College

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# Announcing the Winners of the 2019 Best Graduate and Undergraduate Paper Awards

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The Florida Political Science Association is pleased to announce the best graduate and undergraduate papers at this year's conference. The best graduate paper award went to Davide Dell'Isola from the University of Central Florida for his paper, *Immigration and the Demise of Social-Democratic Parties in Western Europe: Italy, UK, France, Germany*. The best undergraduate paper prize was awarded to Meghan Stevens, also from University of Central Florida, for her paper, *Differences in Voting Margins of Candidates in the Florida Legislature*. Congratulations to our winners! Each of the winners will receive a small monetary award and the opportunity to publish their research in The Florida Political Chronicle.

## Florida Political Science Association Annual Meeting

Saturday, April 4th, 2020  
Stetson University in Deland, FL

The 2020 FPSA Annual Meeting will be held at Stetson University in Deland, Florida on Saturday, April 4, 2020.

**Pre-Register for the Conference and Join/Renew Membership in FPSA at**  
<http://www.fpsanet.org/join-fpsa.html>

**Program Chair:**

Zachary D. Baumann  
Florida Southern College

**Arrangements Chair:**

David Hill  
Stetson University

2020 Call for Papers information will be available in the Fall of 2019.

Below are the current regular sections organized within FPSA. Section chairs and contact information will be announced later this fall in the official Call for Papers. At that time, people interested in participating at the conference can submit paper proposals to the appropriate section and section chair.

- American National Politics
- Political Theory
- Public Policy / Public Administration
- State & Local Government
- International Relations
- Comparative Politics
- Teaching Political Science
- Media and Politics

STETSON  
UNIVERSITY

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# Providing a "Safe Space" in the Classroom to Encourage "Civil Discourse" within the Political Science Field

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By Giselle D. Jamison, Ph.D.

Teaching is an art. In this era of technological saturation and easy access to information that may or may not be sound, imparting so called "objective" knowledge about a particular subject requires the art of convincing students to speak up, seek the "truth" and engage in the exchange of ideas conducive to elevating themselves and others. While all teachers should have these goals, faculty who teach Civics or Politics have the added obligation to safeguard the principles of "competition" that lead to "cooperation" and "civil discourse." These principles are the bedrock of a functioning democracy and thrive when citizens are engaged. One way to promote involvement is to create a "safe space" in the classroom where students can learn that civil discourse is not only desirable but also possible.

A safe space is a teaching environment that promotes the inclusivity of ideas and respect for the uniqueness of each individual, while ensuring that "opportunities for complex cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development exists for all students" (Magdola, 2000: 94 cited in Gayle et. al). It requires an appropriate physical or online location to exchange thoughts, such as having a classroom with movable desks where students can face each other, using big sticky notes to encourage collaborative writing, or utilizing the group "Discussion Function" in learning management systems such as Canvas or Blackboard. It is also an immaterial space where teachers purposely foster a climate of trust and exploration. Moreover, for students of politics, a safe space allows for apprentices to endorse different candidates, defend controversial policies, and support political ideologies even when these candidates or ideologies are unpopular or contrary to societal beliefs.

To develop the climate of trust and exploration required to achieve a safe space area, faculty must first acknowledge that they do not possess the "full" truth and that they themselves have biases. Uncovering biases while challenging preconceived notions of "right and wrong" requires the courage to accept that data can be manipulated, that facts alone never tell the whole story, and that a "good" theory is always falsifiable. Moreover, faculty should ensure that classrooms do not become *indoctrination clinics* to support their own agendas or bash the policies of a particular administration. Safe spaces are places where students can discover a multiplicity of truths.

The societal divisiveness of the Trump era, however, complicates the inter-exchange of political ideas because tensions between party actors and civil society are extremely high. Media outlets report their version of reality and students may be left with the impression that whoever shouts the loudest wins. In this context, instructors have not only an opportunity but also an obligation to develop deep, critical thinking, address biases in the media, and teach students to be respectful to their fellow classmates. Teaching students to think critically involves accepting that every political issue can be countered and that every question may have more than one answer.

To fully understand an issue, students should learn opposing political beliefs to compare and contrast with their own ideas. Teaching only "one side" of each story hurts students' ability to think for themselves and weakens their views. Additionally, disavowing multiple sides kills creativity and discourages students from expressing their opinions for fear of retaliation. By exposing students to the opposite side of an issue, students can defeat the "tendency to deny or rationalize away

discrepancies between one's preexisting beliefs and new information" and accept that everybody is biased, including themselves (Kegley and Raymond, 2014:13).

Students should also learn that cultural differences that come in the form of religion, upbringing, family, race, ethnicity, and nationality also shape our image of reality. These differences, if left unpacked, may contribute to the detrimental "us vs. them" mentality so prevalent in today's society. Teachers should help unpack the cultural differences between the students to help dispel the myth that differences are irreconcilable. By bringing political discussions to the individual level of analysis, faculty may discover that students have more in common with each other than party affiliation, cultural differences, or ideology suggests. Tapping into those commonalities may help students build a culture of empathy and solidarity where disagreement is allowable but working towards consensus is encouraged and rewarded. Safe spaces can then become the arenas that "help students explore their own cultural status, chart the progression of their thoughts at various "difficult moments" during the course, reflect upon their learning experiences, and discuss their "inner" views with individuals of different socio-economic backgrounds, races, and sexual orientations" (Gayle et al, 2013).

In summary, providing a safe space in the classroom where students can develop critical thinking, learn to identify their own biases, and respect classmates' differences begins with the faculty. Engaging students in daily discussions can counter the "zero sum approaches" present in politics today and can teach the necessary soft skills needed for the workplace and society at large to succeed. As Dennis Ross, the diplomatic envoy under the Obama and Bush administrations once said: "it is crucial to know when to talk, but most important, when to listen. You won't be learning when you are talking. You may be shaping or conditioning, but you will not be learning...you are likely to elicit more when you convey such respect and listen actively" (Ross cited in Kegley and Raymond, 2014:14).



*Dr. Giselle D. Jamison is an Associate Professor and Director of Political Science at St. Thomas University in Miami, FL. She teaches courses in international relations and comparative politics.*

Kegley, Charles W., and Gregory Raymond. 2014. *The Global Future. An Introduction*. 5th ed. Boston, MA: Cengage.

Gayle, Barbara Mae Dr.; Cortez, Derek; and Preiss, Raymond W. (2013) "Safe Spaces, Difficult Dialogues, and Critical Thinking," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 5. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsofl.2013.070205>

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# It Takes a Department: Conducting Successful Undergraduate Student Research

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By Denis Rey, Ph.D.

The teaching philosophy that an academic department establishes greatly influences how its professors approach undergraduate student research. In today's higher education environment, the ubiquitous focus on undergraduate research appears dominant across all disciplines. Similar stories arise when I speak to colleagues, their institutions' QEPs are focused on this endeavor, and offices have been created and funding streams made available. But how should one's department tackle undergraduate student research? Below I describe how my own department structured the framework necessary for success in the classroom.

The political science department at the University of Tampa took three important measures to support undergraduate student research. First, action was taken to expand the research methods course from a one-semester offering to a sequence of two semesters, thus making it a yearlong process. The first-semester course trains students in the research designs strategies and data collection techniques relevant to the field. The second-semester course focuses on quantitative analysis. Together, they provide students with the tools necessary for social science research.

The second criteria was the creation of required 400-level research seminars. All political science majors must enroll in at least one research seminar to fulfill graduation requirements. These courses offer students the opportunity to apply the research skills acquired in the research methods sequence. In total, faculty members developed 12 courses within a wide array political science subfields that students can choose from. The 400-level offerings include:

- Public Policy Analysis
- United States National Security Policy
- Congress and Legislative Politics
- International Law
- Comparative Judicial Politics
- Topics in Government and World Affairs (selected topics that can vary)
- Public Opinion
- Politics of Identity
- Political Economy of Africa
- International Organization
- NGOs and Global Civil Society
- Political Psychology

The courses are scheduled so that, at least, one American Government and International Relations or Comparative Politics class is offered each semester. These courses tend to be writing and research intensive and resemble graduate seminars.

The third measure taken was to create a departmental budget line to pay for student travel to professional conferences. Even though such resources were allocated university-wide when the University of Tampa selected undergraduate research as their next QEP---going as far as creating the Office for Undergraduate Research and Inquiry---we decided to make available departmental funds to

signal to students that faculty members greatly encourage and support conference participation for undergraduates. The department awards the funds with strings attached, as students must comply with certain measures, to assure the soundness of the research and preparedness of the student presenter. In short, the departmental funds provide political science faculty members the ability to provide greater oversight of undergraduate student research.

The two 400-level courses that I offer, US National Security Policy and NGOs and Global Civil Society, assume similar organizational structures. Students not only read and discuss the assigned course readings on a weekly basis, comparable to a seminar, but also participate in workshops that are focused directly on conducting research. Here students learn how to become social scientists.

It all begins by articulating a research question that is complex, clear and focused. I tell my students that the question must be answerable in three months and 30 double-spaced pages. Some of the exercises used in class to help develop research questions include having students work in small groups to verbalize their ideas and receive helpful feedback from their group members. Afterwards, each student will write their question on the board and receive additional scrutiny from the class as a whole. I use this opportunity to illustrate how questions can be narrowed or broadened, which appears to benefit not only the student at the board, but those others listening as well. Eventually, students are able to research a topic of their own choosing and develop a workable research question.

After students submit and receive feedback on a two to three page introduction section elaborating the finer points of their research topic, we move on to the literature review. After explaining the purpose of the literature review, we discuss how best to approach conducting and writing a literature review. I use sample literature reviews to show how gaps in our understanding are identified and theoretical arguments laid out. Students learn that both complimentary and competing theories exist to explain social science phenomena. The students will eventually write their literature review section and receive feedback before proceeding to the theory section.

The theory section, I explain to students, is the creative part of the research process. Here students are encouraged to take the existing arguments and expand, enhance, refute, reduce, or embrace them to develop an original explanation for the phenomena they are observing. Students are taught that the study of human behavior produces knowledge gradually, and that only rarely do paradigms shift radically. Students will write the theory section, developing testable hypotheses, and submit it for review.

The empirical method that students are encouraged to employ in my 400-level classes is comparative case study analysis. Students are instructed to use three cases, with case selection based on either the most similar or the most different method design. In addition, students identify their independent, dependent, and control variables in the methodology section. This section is also where students describe how change is measured in the variables of interest and how control variables are held constant across the three cases.

Following the methodology section, students write the case study and case study analyses sections. In the case study section, they simply describe the cases, explaining how the pertinent factors necessary to test their hypotheses unfold. In the case study analyses section they compare across the three cases to determine whether the hypotheses are nullified. I explain to the students that the analyses section is where they bring the hypotheses back into focus by looking at the evidence that the cases produce to make this important determination. Students eventually write separate methodology, case studies, and case studies analyses sections and submit them to receive the professor's feedback.

By this point, the only section of the paper yet to be completed is the conclusion. In the conclusion section, students are to describe their findings, if any, and to illuminate the significance of their research. Moreover, students are asked to identify the shortcomings of their research and suggest the route that future research should assume. During the final weeks of the semester, students participate in panel presentations that closely resemble our professional conferences.

After the semester ends and all the papers are evaluated, I invite those students whose research shows promise to enroll in an independent study with me the next semester. By this point, mind you, students have 30 to 60 pages already written and a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation prepared. With the majority of the work completed, the students and I work on strengthening the research as needed. This could entail expanding the literature review, tightening theoretical arguments or better developing hypotheses, finding better measures, writing more description into the case studies, and/or improving the reasoning behind the case studies analyses.

The independent study consists of me providing feedback and the students completing the revisions. Some students require more hands-on instruction than others, but all will meet with me multiple times to discuss their progress and address difficulties. At the end of the independent study, students present their research at either the Georgia or Florida political science association conferences, depending on the semester in question.

This formula has yielded success for my students. Since employing this approach, I have taken over 50 students to conferences, three have had their research published, two have won best undergraduate paper awards, and one was awarded best poster. More importantly, students have used the papers as writing samples and the experience of conducting research as highlights in graduate and professional school applications. Moreover, when writing recommendation letters, I can accentuate, truly, the discipline, critical thinking skills, and intellectual prowess of these students by recounting their yearlong effort. These students tend to receive the strongest recommendations.

As mentioned earlier, an important foundational principle for successful undergraduate student research requires strong departmental leadership. At my institution, the political science department created the courses necessary for students to learn and develop strong research skills. Those who excel are encouraged and afforded opportunities to hone their skills, which, in turn, leads to their continued success.



*Dr. Denis Rey is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Tampa. He teaches classes in international relations and comparative politics and is a past president the Florida Political Science Association.*



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# Integrating Survey Research into the Classroom

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By Zachary D. Baumann, Ph.D.

Creating meaningful assignments that resonate with students and push them to wrestle with big questions in the field is difficult. Ideally, these tasks engage, challenge, and benefit students from disparate backgrounds and varying levels of academic ability. Several “high impact” practices have been identified in the scholarly literature, often focusing on tasks that engage students outside the classroom, take considerable effort, and require close collaboration with faculty.<sup>1</sup> Over the past two years, I have integrated our on-campus polling center into my classes in an attempt to build more meaningful assignments that engage students solving difficult problems. This essay will describe how I utilize our polling and policy research center, how these assignments have been structured, and my reflections thus far.

The Florida Southern College Center for Polling and Policy Research was founded in 2014 to promote the academic mission of the college. Our goal has been twofold: to provide students the opportunity to understand survey research through first-hand experience and to serve as a resource for faculty. We conduct polls prior to local, state, and national elections as well as fielding studies assessing attitudes toward public policies. Our students have been active participants, conducting presidential and midterm preference polls as well as nationally-representative studies assessing attitudes toward LGBTQ+ policies and reforming political parties. I have involved students in these projects in three principle ways: employing them to work in the call room, using the survey data collected by our students in class, and working with students to design and field their own original studies.

One of the easiest ways to involve students in the polling center is by hiring them as interviewers in the call room. This teaches them how to conduct telephone-based interviews and how to record data while giving them a unique insight into how the public thinks and reacts to politics. Working as a call room employee helps them understand what it means to collect data and act as a good researcher. They gain insight into the world of polling research, better understanding how these studies should be conducted and the myriad ways they can go wrong. Students seem to value the experience, frequently asking if they can be involved in future studies.

Using the data collected by students in the call room is another way I have integrated the Center into classes. Research methods courses are a natural fit for the anonymized survey data we collect. We can discuss how to move from conceptualization, to operationalization, and to measurement using examples from the study and discuss issues related to the accuracy of polls and measurement of concepts using these examples. Additionally, I find students become far more interested in research methods assignments when they—or their fellow students—had a hand in collecting the observations.

Finally, some of my classes have had the opportunity to design and field their own surveys. Students in a political parties and interest groups class conducted a nation-wide study of opinions toward the reform of political parties. Students in a social policy class solicited responses to a variety of LGBTQ+ policies. In both cases, students were responsible for selecting the topic of each study, developing the questions and designing the questionnaire, shepherding the project through the IRB preclearance process, and interpreting the results to use in both seminar and conference papers. The ability to complete ambitious projects and generate results that have appeared in news publications has been rewarding for students and increased interest in conducting social science research.

## How it was Done

How do we conduct our surveys? For telephone-based surveys, we utilize a computer lab dedicated

for use by the polling center and containing about twelve computer stations and telephone lines. We do not have a CATI system. Instead, we rely upon two online vendors, SurveyMonkey and PhoneBurner, to conduct these studies. PhoneBurner is an online platform that allows users to upload lists of telephone numbers and distribute them among many callers. Once a respondent agrees to complete the poll, the call room employees administer the questionnaire using SurveyMonkey. Having responses entered into SurveyMonkey directly allows me to export the data and have it coded and ready for analysis.

Traditionally, I have hired students to work in the polling center and compensated them through the campus work study program. Moving the calling center from a class assignment to a paid position increases the investment students have in the task. I visit classes containing those students with a high likelihood of wanting to participate and encourage them to apply. I interview each applicant and provide training for everyone hired. These two steps not only prepare students to complete their jobs, but they also allow them to better appreciate what is required in fielding a “good” survey. Student callers are provided feedback and aided by a call room manager who supervises the study while it is in the field.

Data generated by the polling center is integrated into the classroom as examples used in instruction and as datasets utilized in completing assignments. Once a survey project is finished, I construct an SPSS file and codebook explaining each of the variables.<sup>ii</sup> In a research methods course, I may use this to demonstrate how variables are constructed, how they can be summarized, how they can be visualized, and how models can be built in an attempt to understand relationships. I also utilize these same datasets when creating student assignments. These projects give many of the same students who collected these data in the call center the opportunity to gain insights from their hard work in the lab.

Providing students the opportunity to design and field their own surveys is among the most ambitious—and rewarding—integrations I have attempted with the polling center. To complete this assignment, I ask members of the class to coordinate on a single topic around which they will design their survey. For example, students in my social policy class decided to ask questions concerning the public’s attitudes toward LGBTQ+ rights. Then, working in pairs, I ask them to design an individual research question and a few questions that would allow them to complete their project. In this way, students are not all writing the same paper and can explore individual questions of interest (while still providing some coherence among the questions included in the questionnaire). Next, we gather, present, and workshop the questions proposed by each group and design the questionnaire. This has been among the most personally rewarding portions of the assignment in the past, as students frequently are able to improve each other’s work with minimal involvement by me and often offer creative ways for their classmates to measure a concept of interest. Once the survey instrument is designed, each of the students completes their human subjects training and submits their work to the Institutional Review Board for preclearance.

Following IRB preclearance, I put the survey in the field. Over the past two years, this has involved obtaining a representative sample of registered voters in the United States using SurveyMonkey’s Audience product. SurveyMonkey curates a pool of respondents throughout the world and can provide a nonprobability sample—largely matching the characteristics of the population you would like to survey—more quickly and at a lower cost than we can often conduct using the survey ourselves. While utilizing the call room would undoubtedly be more educational, due to the size of these projects time, and money, is often a factor. Once responses have been gathered by SurveyMonkey, I export and clean the data and make it available to the students in an SPSS file. They take these data, run statistics on the questions they wrote, and generate their final projects and presentations. Many of these projects have gone on to be presented at local and regional professional conferences.

Integrating survey research into the classroom has been valuable and rewarding but is not without its obstacles. Operating the call center and purchasing samples from SurveyMonkey requires funding. Fortunately, my college recognizes the value this work provides to undergraduate students and has been willing to assist in providing funding. Additionally, I write a survey report at the end of each study and work to develop press releases that are sent to local media outlets to gain attention to our center, students, and college. Almost all of the projects we have completed receive some form of state, local, or national press coverage. Second, conducting survey research with students requires a considerable amount of instructor time. I have found this work to be highly rewarding, however, and am constantly impressed with the work students submit when given the freedom to undertake ambitious projects.



*Dr. Zachary D. Baumann is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Florida Southern College, and serves as the director of FSC's Center on Polling and Policy Research. He teaches classes in research methods, public policy, and American politics.*

<sup>i</sup> Kuh, G.D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

<sup>ii</sup> We utilize SPSS in teaching our undergraduate methods courses, but any other statistics package could be used.

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# Teaching Special Topics Courses in Political Science

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By Austin Trantham, Ph.D.

“What courses are you teaching next semester?” I find myself answering this question at least once every academic year due to an interested colleague, friend, or family member wanting to learn more about the topics I am discussing with my students.

Depending on institutional type, faculty staffing needs, and personal preferences, your answers to this question might include: (A) an introductory course taken by non-majors seeking to fulfill general education requirements, (B) upper-division courses for declared majors in a given area of expertise, or (C) a combination of these classes. However, I encourage you to consider responding in a future semester with answer (D): “A special topics course.”

## Why Offer Special Topics Courses?

While in graduate school during the first months of the Obama administration, I enrolled in a topical course titled “A New Presidency and the Press.” Taught by a former White House news correspondent, the class included students with both Political Science and Communication backgrounds. Weekly discussions illustrated the intersections between the two disciplines, and this experience introduced me to the educational value of special topics classes.

Specialty courses can be academically enriching and personally rewarding for both students and faculty members. These classes allow opportunities for non-majors to gain an introduction and appreciation for a new field of study, while majors have the ability to critically examine their chosen discipline from a unique perspective. Faculty may be able to join with colleagues in other areas to team-teach a course which may lead to unforeseen publishing opportunities on mutually interesting subjects. Finally, special topics courses may allow adjunct faculty the ability to enter a classroom and impart their knowledge and experiences to students while exploring unique course material.

## Personal Experiences with Special Topics Courses

This section provides an overview of two topical courses that I have taught across three institutions. Each course contains a broad overview of topical content and selected assigned readings, as well as how I promote student learning through writing assignments and active learning exercises.

### Scandal and Corruption in American Politics

Many examples of political scandal and corruption exist in modern times and politicians, journalists, and academics have a vested interest in critically analyzing these events. My learning objectives in this course focus on equipping students to understand the basic theories and typologies associated with political scandal and corruption, explaining the significance of various scandals and corrupt events in American political history, and synthesizing concepts through a potential real-world scandal scenario.

Following discussions concerning theoretical concepts important to this subject such as the roles of political support and trust in government, the class engages in a historical overview of political machines in the United States. Several historical cases, including Mayor Richard Daley’s control of Chicago politics in the 1950s, allow students to understand the timeless nature of these organizations. The main text for this unit is *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (1905), a direct account of life working in the famed New York machine in the early twentieth century. In this section of the course, students are

tasked with writing a paper designing their own modern-day organization including developing a plan for gaining and maintaining trust and support among local constituents.

The course then moves to discussing consequential sexual, financial, and power-based scandals. The sexual affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky is a central subject for discussion due to its continuing relevance in the current political climate. Other sexually-based acts by former governors, senators, and representatives are addressed by readings and viewing news clips chronicling the events. To put different types of sexual incidents into comparative context, I employ William Benoit's Theory of Image Restoration Discourse from the field of political communication as a classroom activity. This concept focuses on using rhetorical strategies to justify inappropriate conduct including denying the event, shifting the blame, or directly attacking the accuser. Students apply Benoit's work by studying a sampling of addresses from press conferences given by those embroiled in sexual scandals and deciding the tactic employed by the politician.

The Watergate period serves as the focal point for examining political corruption amidst power scandals. The class reads Bernstein and Woodward's *All the President's Men* (1974) and watches Richard Nixon's post-presidency interviews in 1977 with British journalist David Frost to gain a more direct understanding of the individuals and events comprising this consequential time in American political history. A subsequent topic in the course focuses on Watergate's impact through discussion of reform efforts, including the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 which created the Office of the Independent Counsel.

One way that I evaluate student learning at the conclusion of this course is through a written Scandal Containment Plan. Students must advise a politician on how to survive an ongoing sexual, financial, or power-based scandal threatening to end their career. Beginning with an instructor-provided vignette outlining the scandal's parameters, students must integrate aspects of course content into their action plan, including detailing how the politician will maintain public support and their response to the news media's reporting of events. A similar type of historical scandal studied during the course must be compared and examined along with the given scenario for any lessons that could be learned from its consequences. At the end, each assignment must formally advise the politician on how to survive the scandal and remain in office. This assessment allows students to creatively demonstrate course knowledge while displaying critical thought in how they explain the ultimate decisions found in their plan.

### Politics and Popular Culture

I designed this course as a way for students to better comprehend the intersections between politics and society through diverse mediums such as art, music, television, and film. The class is cross-listed to count for Political Science or Sociology credit; this allows students from both subjects to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue during the semester. Students are assigned Joseph Foy's *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington* as a "textbook" of sorts, but I look to popular publications and journal articles for the bulk of required readings. Course content is divided into four sections: (1) analyzing the relationship between beliefs, attitudes, and culture emphasized by the mass media, (2) examining depictions of political institutions, (3) understanding how behavior may shape culture through studying civilian protests and social uprisings, and (4) the intersection between culture, politics, and public policy through depictions of the criminal justice system in the television show *Crime Scene Investigation* and the impact of Title IX within college athletics.

Throughout the course, several interactive assignments require students to analyze the central themes being considered through different media forms. When discussing political institutions, students must compare Frank Capra's classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) with episodes of *House of Cards* (2013) on Netflix, two notable cultural depictions of Congress on film and television. Students are instructed to examine how key concepts relating to Congress including the workings of

the legislative process, political representation, and leadership roles are depicted in each program by referencing specific scenes and character dialogue as supporting evidence. This assignment allows for a critical distinction to be made between how Washington, D.C. is perceived through Hollywood writers versus the actual political processes occurring in our nation's capital.

Teaching this course also allows me to expose students to different types of media. In an effort to enliven class sessions while providing material for discussions and exams, I play a medley of songs from various genres illustrating course topics. Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" is used as an introduction to popular culture in political history while "Video Killed the Radio Star" by The Buggles depicts the impact of media in society. Other songs include Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" and "Where is the Love?" by the Black Eyed Peas as lyrical depictions of protest and social uprising during the Vietnam War and War on Terror. Having provided an overview of my classes, I will now offer advice to faculty new to teaching special topics courses.

### **Do It Yourself: Practical Advice for Designing a Special Topics Course**

You have decided to offer your first specialty class in an upcoming semester. What should be kept in mind when conceptualizing and preparing the course? First, the adage of "keeping it simple" strongly applies in this case. Focus the subject of the course on content that you already know and believe is able to be packaged in a captivating way. As an example, creating a new topics course on "Comparative Executives" in a short time due to departmental need came much easier given my prior research and teaching interests on the American presidency and introductory comparative politics. Second, brainstorm a catchy title for the offering. While not required, it may help to attract students and boost enrollment. For instance, "Introduction to Political Leadership" might be reimagined as "Democrats, Dictators, and Demagogues" to make it more attractive to non-major students who might not otherwise enroll in a political science course. Finally, critically assess the amount of prior knowledge needed for the course, difficulty of readings, etc. when deciding where the new course should fall in your department's curriculum (i.e. a freshman-level seminar or a senior-level offering). These are a few steps to consider when planning a special topics course.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Offering several special topics courses have proven to be rewarding aspects of my faculty career. I am currently in the preliminary stages of planning to team-teach a Political Communication course during the Fall 2020 semester with my communication colleagues. Our initial conversations have been positive, and I am excited for this new collaboration. Teaching a special topics course can be a worthwhile endeavor, allowing students to gain a new appreciation for different aspects of the political world. So, what courses are you teaching next semester?



*Dr. Austin Trantham is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Jacksonville University. He teaches courses in American Politics, Comparative Politics, Research Methodology and Public Policy.*

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# Reflections on Teaching A Survey Course in International Relations: Combining Theory, Current Events and Professional Development

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By Kelly McHugh, Ph.D.

Courses variably titled, "Introduction to International Relations", "Introduction to International Politics", or "Introduction to Global Studies" are a staple of undergraduate curricula at U.S. institutions of higher education. They serve as an important gateway course for Political Science majors, introducing them to a major subfield in the discipline. They are equally valuable for non-majors taking the course to fulfill a degree distribution requirement, offering these students the opportunity to take a theoretically and methodically informed tour of issues in global politics. Although these courses are a key part of any Political Science program, a perusal of sample syllabi demonstrates that there is little consensus regarding the canonical content of this course. One set of syllabi is structured around major theoretical perspectives in the discipline, covering realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, and feminism; conversely, other syllabi center the course content around hot-button global issues like terrorism, trade, human rights, and climate change, using these topics to elucidate patterns of cooperation and conflict in global politics.

My approach to this course represents a hybrid of the two approaches. If my class has a central thesis, it is this: the world is understandable, and in fact, predictable. As such, in my course, I seek to convey to students that major events in global politics, such as the outbreak of wars, the spread of free trade, and the emergence of radical ideology, have explicable and often predictable causes. In my experience, most students arrive at college with little systematic understanding of international politics, beyond a general knowledge of 20th century history and an awareness of salient current events. Moreover, even those students who are attentive consumers of news tend to see contemporary global developments as random and mystifying, attributing developments such as the nuclearization of the Korean peninsula, or the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, to the whims of a single leader or a configuration of improbable circumstances unlikely to be repeated again.

To rectify this propensity, I seek to have students develop what sociologist C. Wright Mills called the "sociological imagination"; as Mills explained in his seminal 1959 book, "the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period." In accordance with this, I aim to have students understand the way in which international politics impacts domestic politics and vice versa, how shifts in the global economy will impact their job prospects upon graduation, as well as the manner in which their choices at the ballot box shape U.S. military, diplomatic, and economic involvement in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and beyond.

In the remainder of this essay, I describe how I structure my "Introduction to International Relations" class to advance this goal. I have taught this class each fall at Florida Southern College since 2011. Through a process of trial and error, I have developed a syllabus that provides students with a solid grounding in the scientific study of international relations, introducing them to major theoretical perspectives, while simultaneously addressing issues in global politics that have a profound impact on their lives. I will detail some of the major assignments I utilize in the course, in the hopes they provide useful for other faculty members who share my pedagogical goals.

## Teaching IR Theory

I spend the first part of the semester providing students with an overview of key theories and concepts in international politics. In particular, I structure this part of the class around two dueling schools of thought, namely realism and liberalism/idealism. At the same time, I also introduce core concepts in the discipline, including sovereignty, soft power, deterrence, and collective security. Some of these concepts are admittedly abstract; to ground this terminology in real-life examples, during the initial weeks of the semester, I frequently require them to select a news article and tie the content of that article to a concept covered so far in class. For instance, an article on the Kurdish population in Syria may be used to illustrate the contested nature of sovereignty, while an article on Chinese trade policy can demonstrate the growing role of economic power in the current world. This assignment also serves an ancillary purpose, in that it helps students become more savvy consumers of news, identifying credible sources of international news.

For the culminating assignment in this section of the course, students work in pairs and take a piece of popular culture -- whether it be a TV show, video game, movie, or social trend -- and link it to at least three concepts covered in the first part of the course. This assignment, in addition to adding a bit of levity to otherwise serious subject matter, also advances the course's goal of training students to apply theoretical perspectives to concrete events, including fictional events.

Students have proven to be deeply creative in completing this assignment; during the previous academic year, one team used the film *Dodgeball* to illustrate the dynamics of a bipolar international system, while another group summarized the feud between Taylor Swift and Kanye West, arguing that the involvement of other celebrities constituted a series of proxy wars. Students have also used zombie movies and TV shows to illustrate the anarchical international system, and superhero movies to illustrate the enduring debate between realism and liberalism.

## Teaching About Global Issues

In the next section of the course, we focus on three major policy issues: nuclear proliferation, free trade, and economic development. By building on the content covered in the first part of the course, I seek to ground these contemporary policy debates in a theoretical understanding of international politics. In the section on nuclear weapons, we first cover the history of these weapons and the variable successes of past efforts at disarmament. Following this, we conduct a United Nations simulation during two consecutive class periods, where each student plays the role of a stakeholder state. Specifically, I task the students with developing a plan to reduce the overall number of nuclear weapons in the world; in developing their policy proposals, they must take into account the theories of state behavior addressed in the previous section. At the conclusion of the simulation, students complete an accompanying written assignment, where they explain their strategy, and also use theory to reflect on the behavior of the other states. For example, when explaining the failure of great powers to cooperate, a student might point to realist motivations; conversely, in explaining the willingness of democracies to work together, a student could highlight principles of liberalism.

Following this, we spend several weeks examining international political economy. In this section of the class, I cover basic economic theory, debates over free trade and economic development, as well as the history of globalization. For their major assignment in this section, students work in small groups to complete a commodity chain analysis; here they describe the origins, production, and political implications of a commodity sold in U.S. stores. Students may select any item; last year, students researched commodities as varied as avocados, PlayStation consoles, Nike sneakers, and Barbie dolls.

This assignment furthers my overarching goal of having students situate their personal experiences and economic behavior as part of the macro-level social, economic and political forces they experience. Upon the completion of the project, students often are surprised about how diffuse the



supply chain for an ostensibly simple item can be; they discover that some items contain components from multiple countries, and these components are often shipped to a developing country for assembly, before being transferred back to the developing world for sale. Moreover, after completing the project student often report that they are more likely to carefully scrutinize the products they purchase, now that they are cognizant of the wide-ranging impact of global capitalism.

For the final project in the course, teams of students must select a transnational policy issue; this is an issue that impacts multiple states, and thus cannot be solved by the actions of any single country, no matter how powerful. Students must then generate several solutions to that policy problem, and ultimately, select a preferred policy after weighing the costs, benefits, and political viability of each option. For students who are not Political Science majors, this provides an ideal opportunity for them to expressly link their field of study to the course material. For example, in past semesters, a Marine Biology student addressed the issue of ocean pollution, a Computer Science major examined how terrorists use social media for recruitment, and an Education major addressed the problem of women's literacy in the developing world.

### **Conclusion**

My approach to this course has been honed over several years, as I sought to clarify the purpose of this course and assess the degree to which the material and assignments advanced these goals. Was I training students to think like social scientists? Was I empowering them as global citizens? Was I illustrating the nexus between international and national politics? To further these goals, I adopted an approach that focuses on the interplay between history, current events, and IR theory. This approach avoids focusing on theory in the abstract, something that provides little long-term value to students who do not take additional courses in the sub-field. Reciprocally, I avoid the approach of covering a "grab-bag" of topics without any central thread connecting the course material, something that often contributes to the idea that international politics is inherently chaotic and unpredictable.

As a faculty member at a small college, where the average class size in the department is 20 students, I have great flexibility in using presentations, simulations, and research papers paper as assessment tools. This approach, however, could be adapted to other class settings, including larger, lecture-based course, or classes offered online; many of the assignments could be modified using discussion boards, blogs, or shorter response papers. Overall, such an approach to teaching a survey course in international relations can help us give our students the academic content about which we care deeply, while simultaneously preparing them to live in an increasingly interconnected world.



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