

Justin J. Norris

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

As an educator, I pursue three inter-related goals. First, help students build and polish overall critical thinking skills. Second, help students develop and hone the concomitant skills necessary for tackling complex problems in both academic and real-world settings. Third, entice students into embracing the scientific method so that they can create or better understand scientific findings, and incorporate scientific reasoning into their daily lives. In striving to meet these goals, my hope is that students will not only possess a thorough, factual, understanding of the nature of politics, political actors, and political institutions, but will also understand how politics is relevant to their daily lives. In so doing, students should become savvy consumers of political information, that upon graduation, will be prepared to make meaningful contributions to their communities and the workforce.

This is of course easier said than done. To pursue these goals, I incorporate several different strategies designed to provide students with the necessary information for becoming conversant with the different theories and findings from political science literature, while also trying to tie this information to contemporary politics and issues pertaining to their daily lives. In practical terms, I utilize a combination of structured discussions, lectures, simulations/experiments, videos, and written assignments that allow students to learn the important concepts, actors, ideas, and terms, while also applying the information in ways that are relevant to their own interests. I believe this makes abstract or complex concepts more digestible to the average student, but also increases the likelihood that students will not only be able to recite facts and figures, but also explain why the terms matter, understand how they work, and then apply them outside of the classroom.

In my political parties course, I begin each session with an in-class discussion. At the beginning of class, students are given the opportunity (for credit) to present news stories to the class, with the sole stipulation that the story must be relevant to party politics in some way. I ask the presenter to summarize the story, discuss why the story is relevant, discuss whether the story is objective, overtly ideological, or some combination thereof. I then invite the entire class to begin asking questions of the presenter and each other, which I use to navigate the discussion so that the class can unpack some of the ways we can understand the story using the concepts presented in the class.

Using this approach, students have had meaningful discussions on topics as varied as the dominance of the two-party system, the role of third parties in the American system, the implications of political polarization on US diplomatic relations with Israel, possible reforms to the presidential nominating system, and the proper role of interest groups. By using less stringent criteria for choosing stories, I've found that students have an easier time finding stories that interest them, but are still useful for instruction. In many respects, this makes it easier for students to apply the concepts they learn for understanding the world outside the classroom environment.

Since some students are not as vocal, or are apprehensive to state their opinions during in-class discussions, I also require that students write two memos using the same requirements used for the class discussion, but unlike with the in-class discussions, the written memos require that students discuss how some of the concepts from class apply to the story presented in the memos. I also give students the opportunity to do a memo for extra credit.

I strategically use videos in the classroom so students can sharpen their analytical reasoning skills by evaluating real world politics. In my campaign politics course, I begin class with a short video and ask students to state their opinions about the video as it relates to content, message, target audience, and effectiveness. If the video is a political advertisement, I also ask students if they would have released the video if they oversaw the organization that paid for it. This helps students begin thinking about the normative implications political actors wrestle with when they make day to day decisions.

I use written assignments to develop analytical reasoning skills for both applying class materials and tackling with the normative aspects of politics. In my campaign politics course, I ask students to play the role of a political consultant for a presidential campaign. Throughout the semester students are presented with different theoretical scenarios where the campaign must take decisive action. Students must write a memo for each scenario outlining three choices based on what they've learned from class materials. Students are also required to provide a cost/benefit analysis for each course of action, state some of the normative implications for each course of action, state their preferred course, why they believe this should be the course of action, and what the likely outcomes would be if the campaign were to take this course of action.

I also use simulations and experiments in the classroom to help demonstrate the importance of institutional design as it relates to shaping political outcomes. In my electoral behavior course, I hold a number of mock elections using different voting rules and run a mock caucus for an entire class period using rules similar to those used in the Iowa Caucus. This helps students learn about how the structure of political institutions societies use to make decisions can themselves help shape outcomes.

I use several approaches to help improve scientific and informational literacy while encouraging students to incorporate scientific reasoning into their daily lives. I include the findings from political science research in the form of both tables and graphs in the lectures in all of my courses, and I take the time to explain how people can, and should, evaluate this information by discussing the scope, context, and limits of the information in question, and then explain to students how the presentation of information can often influence how people interpret information. This helps students become more discerning consumers of not only political information, but information in general.

I have also found that assigning papers is useful for demonstrating the importance of the scientific method. When I teach upper division courses, I require that students write a research paper, and advise students to choose a topic that interests them personally. Throughout the semester I give instruction as to the proper construction of research questions, developing theory, and the nature of hypothesis testing. In their papers, students are required to present a research question, present an argument along with a testable hypothesis, and then test the hypothesis using both supporting evidence and contradictory evidence. To make the process more digestible, I have students work on different aspects of the paper writing process at different times during the semester, and require them to turn in periodic status reports. This increases the likelihood of successful execution.

In my electoral behavior class, I take this one step further by requiring students to bolster their papers using evidence derived from simple data analysis. Students are required to test their hypothesis using descriptive statistics, cross-tabs, and visual representations culled from real data. To ease students into this I provide sample datasets, teach them how to read codebooks, teach them how to clean data, and teach them how to do simple analysis using readily available software (SPSS, STATA, R, and Excel). We live in an increasingly data-driven world, and I believe that teaching students data analysis helps them develop skills that will not only help them better appreciate the scientific process, but will also help them develop beneficial skills for when they enter the workforce.

Finally, I try to make sure that the classroom is an inclusive and inviting place for students of all stripes. Politics is all encompassing, and I allow students to discuss or ask questions about virtually any topic, so long as it is done with respect and civility. I do not allow derogatory language, and I will not tolerate bullying. I try to teach students that people can disagree with one another, sometimes vehemently, but despite this, they can still treat one another with respect, and human decency. Moreover, I know that college can be stressful and/or intimidating, especially for new students and non-traditional students. In response to this, I try to be approachable, and I make myself available to students, with the hope that they will not hesitate to contact me if they are struggling with the material, need advice for their work, or just need to talk. I, myself, was a non-traditional student, and know firsthand the importance of good academic mentors, and professors who were willing to listen. I try to be that for others.