Ideology in the Classroom

Time to Rethink Your Teaching Ideology?

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College students may read about ideology in their political science textbooks, but they also experience it through what their professors say in the classroom and tweet outside of it. The experience may be more important than the text. In an introductory course in American politics—the political science course that undergraduates are most likely to take—the assigned textbook probably contains little about political ideology.[1] As standard texts define it for the students, "ideology" is "a coherent, organized set of ideas founded on basic principles" (Kollman 2019, 351) or "a comprehensive way of understanding political or cultural situations; it is a set of assumptions about the way society works that helps us organize our beliefs, information, and reactions to new situations" (Lowi et al. 2018, 390). Ideology within the United States, the textbooks elaborate, most often is explained as two main types: American-style conservatism, and liberalism, enhanced by some socialism and libertarianism (e.g., Kollman 2019, 351–52; Lowi et al. 2018, 390–91).

In the real world outside of these textbooks, political science professors are likely to have their own coherent, organized set of ideas about politics as well as their own set of assumptions about the way it should be taught. A 2019 *PS* symposium examined ideology within the political science discipline, focusing squarely on matters of liberalism and conservatism. It included questions regarding the extent of ideological diversity within political science (Atkeson and Taylor 2019; Marineau and Williams 2019) and whether a lack of ideological diversity creates problems for our discipline (Campbell 2019; Gray 2019; Rom 2019; Wilson 2019; Zigerell 2019). Collectively, the authors asked: Is political science too liberal (or Democratic), and does this liberal tilt bias research, service, and instruction?

IDEOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

This symposium focuses on ideology in the classroom, which has at least three meanings. First, it can involve introducing students to political ideologies (e.g., liberalism, conservativism, and socialism). The article by Funk and Sclofsky (2021) takes this approach, as they bemoan what they assess to be the relative absence of Marxism in political science curricula. The problem with ideology in the classroom, in their view, is not the lack of conservative voices but rather the marginalization of the true left. They argue that Marxist analysis is necessary to provide "a 'ruthless criticism' of the structures that underlie the political–economic crises afflicting Western liberal democracies" (Funk and Sclofsky 2021).

A second meaning concerns the messages that political science faculty convey affirming or rejecting specific (liberal or conservative) ideological (or partisan) principles and policies. Responding to frequently voiced conservative concerns that higher education is indoctrinating students with liberal values, or penalizing those who voice conservative ones, Burmila (2021) and Woessner and Maranto (2021) examine whether the political tilt of the political science profession leads to liberal indoctrination or bias.

Burmila (2021) assesses the evidence regarding whether faculty are indoctrinating students with liberal beliefs while punishing those with conservative views. Although he finds little evidence in support of either proposition, he argues that professors can (and should) take additional steps to ensure that classrooms are free from bias and open to the free exchange of ideas from diverse perspectives. Woessner and Maranto (2021) continue this exploration of "academic liberalism and conservative criticism" (Woessner and Kelly-Woessner 2015). They find that although political science students tend to become somewhat more liberal while in college, the shift is modest, not unique to political science, and not likely caused by the ideological views of their professors. They note, hopefully, that political science majors become (somewhat) more supportive of free speech.

A third meaning considers the teaching ideology of the professor—that is, the assumptions that professors have about what should be taught and how to teach it. Rom and Mitchell (2021) examine the perils of teaching in a "call-out" culture, in which statements by instructors or students that are perceived as offensive (or simply controversial) can be used to excoriate, humiliate, or intimidate them. They suggest potential approaches for conducting classes in ways that do not avoid difficult conversations but rather do not inflame.

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING IDEOLOGY

Even if their teaching ideology is only implicit, every teacher undoubtedly develops one, formed by their own educational experiences, training, and reflections. Once formed, like political ideologies, they are likely to change only slowly. I know my ideas about teaching, until recently, were not fundamentally different from those I had at the beginning of my career. Like all of us, I believed it uncontroversial to treat students fairly and to present political science knowledge as accurately

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and as honestly as I could. My conviction that it is more important to offer students a memorable experience than to provide them political science content remains unchanged despite the revolution in classroom technology and evolution in student culture. I have gradually shifted my grading system to put more weight on effort and less on performance because I have become more convinced that pure performance-based scoring reinforces existing student-resource inequalities (Rom et al. 2019).[2] Surely, though, university faculty differ in teaching ideology as they do in political ideology.

Given decisions regarding fairness, goals, and effort, perhaps the most explicitly political element of teaching ideology involves professors' decisions about whether to conceal or reveal their own political ideology. Just as it is possible that differing political ideologies can be presented honestly and fairly, political science instructors can have legitimate and compelling reasons to prefer either to conceal or reveal their own ideology and to believe that their choice is preferable to the alternative.[3]

Professors may choose to reveal their partisan identification and ideological preferences in the spirit of honesty and openness: "This is who I am, and this is what I believe" (Journell 2019). There is a certain virtue to this approach. It shows students that we are humans, not only "scientists," and readily acknowledges the fact that as a close observer of politics, we have opinions and preferences regarding good politicians and policy. More important, the revealers can demonstrate how we can use critical-thinking skills to develop or defend these positions: "This is *why* I am a conservative (or liberal), Democrat (or Republican), and *why* I favor policy X." An extension of this revelatory approach is a "walk-the-talk" approach in which the professor does not only reveal ideological preferences but also acts on them. One approach that exemplifies this is the "teacher–scholar–activist" who is committed to "social justice, political activism, and social change" (Romano and Daum 2018). A final argument in favor of revealing our political ideology is the idea that it is impossible to hide it: students will see right through any claims of neutrality.[4]

The problem with the revelatory approach is that professors hold authority, with the power to offer or withhold rewards and punishments regarding grades, recommendations, and so forth. Whereas professors might hold that their personal beliefs will not affect the students' treatment, the prudent student has reason to be wary. Worse, a student might attempt to curry favor with the professor by mimicking those beliefs or by remaining silent rather than challenging them. The larger the majority of students who agree with the professor, the more difficult it will be for a student in the minority to speak. When I have asked colleagues about this possibility, the typical response is: "I'm tougher on those who agree with me." The sentiment is laudable, but it contradicts a substantial amount of evidence on politically motivated reasoning and confirmation bias (Druckman 2012; Lodge and Tabor 2000; Nickerson 1998). Students are not foolish to wonder whether they receive fair treatment from openly ideological faculty.

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The alternate model, and the one that seems more commonly adopted, seeks neutrality. In this model, professors do all in their power to conceal their ideological predilections. This takes the form of evoking equivalencies across the relevant categories. For example, both Republicans and Democrats sincerely seek to establish electoral policies that benefit the public interest as they see it. Republicans seek to tighten registration and voting standards to enhance the integrity of elections. Democrats seek to expand voting rights so that more individuals can participate in the democratic process. Both parties, moreover, pursue these policies as a matter of self-interest: narrowing the electorate is seen generally to favor Republicans and increasing it to benefit Democrats.[5] Both parties, therefore, simultaneously pursue public and private interests. A neutral professor would avoid inferring motives by claiming that Republicans want voter suppression or Democrats want voter fraud. Still, without prejudicing the issue, a professor can usefully encourage students to examine the claims carefully: How often does in-person voter fraud occur? What is the impact of increasing the early-voting window? What does it mean to "purge" the voter rolls, and what is the history of purging? Accurate evidence, fairly presented, can help students develop their own knowledge and perspective on these issues.[6]

In recent decades, it was relatively straightforward for a professor to maintain classroom neutrality on many of the controversial issues in American politics including taxes, immigration, abortion, and civil rights. As long as the debates could be portrayed as being on a more-or-less single continuum (e.g., lower taxes versus higher taxes; less restrictive versus more restrictive abortion policy), the public benefit *and* self-interest equivalency was defensible. We all have professional and personal perspectives on these issues, of course, but it was reasonable to believe that, in general, there were no compelling reasons for professors to disclose their ideological or partisan views.

A position of ideological neutrality is much easier to maintain if our person, family, and community are not directly threatened by the substantial harm caused by counter-ideologies and policies. The prospect of harm, especially to vulnerable and marginalized groups, understandably can lead to the view that equivalency is complicity and,

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therefore, the moral imperative is not neutrality but instead vocal opposition.

RETHINKING CLASSROOM IDEOLOGY

In general, ideologies change slowly, but major shocks can produce dramatic shifts. In recent years (and especially since 2016 in the United States), multiple countries have experienced three interrelated political shocks.[7] The first shock was the rise of authoritarian leaders who seem to be little constrained by constitutional institutions (e.g., independent judiciaries and administrative agencies), political norms (e.g., treating opponents with a modicum of respect), or even the truth (e.g., as they promote "alternative facts"). A second major shock in the global political climate is that it is more polarized: as the discourse has harshened, disagreement has tipped into contempt, often teetering toward violence. Third, truth itself has been shocked. We no longer seem to agree on what the truth is or who is most qualified to identify and convey it.

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These shocks should be sufficient for political scientists to reexamine their teaching ideologies, whatever they are. They have made me reconsider mine. My core principles—such as seeking fairness and rewarding effort—remain unchanged. Likewise, I have maintained my effort to be neutral toward partisanship and public policy, even in the face of dramatic policy shifts.[8] However, political scientists now might usefully ask if they have an obligation to engage in a specific type of advocacy within the classroom: the advocacy of anti-authoritarian principles and values.[9] Although these principles cannot be stated without objection, they seek in general to remedy the existential threat to constitutional institutions and norms, civil dialogue and civic virtues, and truth (i.e., as far as it is in our power to identify the truth).

One political benefit of such advocacy would be that it does not align neatly on a liberal–conservative ideological dimension; therefore, it would be less susceptible to demonization by partisans. Conservatives—at least in the US tradition—would find these principles not only unproblematic but also exactly the type of values that should be promoted in college classrooms. Liberals, in contrast, might have been less likely in the past to support such classroom advocacy due to the value they placed on dissent, diversity, and subjectivity. However, because right-wing actors have been the primary force seeking to undermine institutions, increase polarization, and undermine science, liberal faculty can find common cause with their more conservative colleagues in advocating for anti-authoritarian values.

Content regarding authoritarianism and authoritarian values has long been taught in political science classes, especially international relations and comparative politics. Constitutional concerns are core to courses on US politics, as are issues regarding the news media. Political theorists have devoted substantial effort to developing and explicating democratic theory as well as the forms of government that might challenge democracy. Yet, textbooks—at least those on US politics—contain little or no mention of civic engagement, civil dialogue, or truth (or its opposite, "fake news").[10] What is needed now is not necessarily more content and better concepts but instead teaching ideologies that demonstrate greater willingness to provide normative support to anti-authoritarian values. The following sections outline potential ideas for doing so.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The American Political Science Association (APSA) stated that "Education for civic engagement and responsive governance were founding objectives of the political science profession" (APSA n.d.).[11] Yet, in recent decades, political science drifted away from those objectives, in part as our discipline became more focused on scientific rather than normative concerns (Colby 2007) and in part because there was little consensus on how civic engagement should be taught. To the extent that civic engagement was encouraged, it was generally limited to important-but-narrow calls for voting. As should be obvious, voting alone is not sufficient engagement. Authoritarians are proud of their vote tallies.

The time for civic disengagement is over. APSA is now taking substantial steps to promote deep civic engagement and to avoid concerns about ideological bias.[12] Although APSA considered civic engagement a "founding objective," it lacked an organized section focusing on civic engagement until April 2020 (APSA 2020b). In 2013, APSA published *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen* (McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013), followed by *Teaching Engagement Across the Curriculum* in 2017 (Matto, McCartney, and Simpson 2017). These books include best practices for classroom use; the associated website contains a wide variety of classroom resources (APSA n.d.) For those who want to incorporate civic engagement in their classroom ideology, the profession is well equipped to help. The question is whether

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our discipline will embrace civic engagement as an element of our teaching ideologies. I hope it does.

CIVIL DISCOURSE

The need for civil discourse and its importance for civic engagement are not novel ideas.[13] Scholars from various disciplines have examined the sources of incivility, its detrimental impacts on the quality of civic life, and its potential cures (e.g., Edyvane 2017; Goens 2019; Herbst 2010; Mower and Robison 2012). Within college classrooms, professors can induce civil discourse with rewards (e.g., participation points) or compel it (e.g., through grades or disciplinary sanctions). But—and this is a significant "but"—a more thorough ideology promoting civility would seek to extend it outside the walls of the classroom into political (and other) discussions within families, social groups, and even social networks. Is it possible to imagine our students, in the future, remembering our classes in ways that inspire them to be more civil in all of their social interactions?

Civility does not necessarily imply courtesy or politeness but rather, more properly (given that our discipline recognizes that conflict is inherent in politics), "the avoidance of gratuitous escalation and excessive hostility" (Talisse 2020). As difficult as this may be to achieve in a divided society, it seems more of a floor than a ceiling. Would a more appropriate goal be one that, through the words and actions of professors, seeks to create a student mindset of open-minded reflection? APSA has not made it a priority to provide resources enabling political scientists to develop a teaching ideology of civility. Perhaps it should.

TRUTH

Oh, for the days when we could tell our students to read from the mainstream media (e.g., *The New York Times*), avoid Wikipedia, rely on government data, and trust refereed articles. Current US political science textbooks still devote far more space to the historical development of the media and to questions such as "Is the media biased?" than to the more pressing questions of "Whom can we trust? How can we know that information is credible?" Moreover, if the question were now asked, "*Who* is the media?," the answer surely would be: "Anyone with Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok and the next generation of social media apps."

Calling on fact checkers will not be enough; neither will merely providing more factually correct political information (Kahne and Bowyer 2017). As a result, a teaching ideology that seeks to inculcate the habits of the mind that enable students to differentiate between information and misinformation and between truth and falsehoods will be essential, not only for the study of politics but also for a healthy democracy. At the moment, the methods for developing essential digital-literacy habits may have to come from outside of political science (e.g., Anstead 2021; Kavanagh and Rich 2018; see also Gormley 2017). "What is the truth?," of course, is a question that has been asked since antiquity. Updating our teaching ideologies will require us to reflect—and then act—on the ways that students of today can best find their answers.

CONCLUSION

Our scholarly tradition strongly and appropriately resists efforts to instruct faculty about what and how to teach. For academic freedom to be real, faculty must be able to develop their own teaching ideologies, which will vary among faculty in the same way that political ideologies vary among individuals. Still, certain elements of professorial ideology in the classroom dominate—and for good reason. Political science faculty generally embrace fairness, reward effort and accomplishment to varying degrees, and make considered decisions regarding how much of their own political ideology to reveal or conceal.

This symposium examines ideology in the classroom that, the authors hope, will lead readers to reflect on their own classroom ideology. As the global shift toward authoritarianism proceeds, perhaps it is time to reflect on whether our current teaching ideologies are adequate for the task of educating students for civic engagement, civility, and the ability to distinguish the real from the fake.

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NOTES

1. For example, the textbook I have used most recently (Kollman 2019, 351–53) contains a little more than one page on ideology; Kernell et al. (2019) do not even include an entry for "ideology" in their index.
2. The expectation that effort is positively related to performance, fortunately, is supported.
3. Hess and McAvoy (2014) provide an excellent discussion of these issues for high school–level classes.
4. One study found that rather than correctly identifying their professors' ideologies, students project their own ideology on them (Braidwood and Ausderan 2017).
5. Conceptions of self-interest are not always correct (Cohn 2019).
6. Such neutrality can be difficult to maintain, especially among highly partisan faculty on the most highly partisan issues. Such a professor might ask, "Can anyone *seriously* believe that Republicans care about voter integrity and not about suppressing Democratic votes?"
7. Or, as Wright and Campbell (2020) stated, "[o]ver the past decade, the world has grown more authoritarian, nationalistic, xenophobic, unilateralist, anti-establishment, and anti-expertise."
8. I believe that neutrality is appropriate regarding principles, if not specific practices. What US immigration policy is should be open to debate; whether children should be put in cages should not. In his comments on the draft of this article, Gormley suggested an attitude of "selective neutrality" in which scholars can take policy positions on matters of central importance to their work.
9. There is no generally accepted positive term associated with these values (e.g., liberal constitutionalism and constitutional liberalism); hence, my use of the negative.
10. The index for the Kollman textbook (2017) does not contain "civic engagement," "civil dialogue," "fake news," and other related terms. The Kernell et al. textbook (2019, 634–37) contains three pages on "fake news," arguing that "Trump's efforts to paint the news as useless or even malicious seem to be falling largely on deaf ears." The discussion of fake news is analytic and empirical; no guidance is provided to students on how to recognize (or avoid) it.
11. Long before APSA, Horace Mann advocated for civic engagement as one of the core reasons for public education.
12. The APSA RAISE the Vote website states that the organization "retains full editorial control over campaign posts, and expects all posts to be nonpartisan in framing, language, and tone" (APSA 2020a).
13. Herbst (2014, 6, 10) argued that "civility is the scaffold for civic engagement" and that "civic engagement is the future of higher education."

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