

## **Preparing Students for Civic Engagement in the Era of “Fake News”**

**Nathan J. Combes**  
*Columbus State University*

### **Abstract**

I recommend that instructors allow students to determine the content for *Introduction to American Government*. I also recommend that instructors assign students to conduct independent research on each unit of *American Government* rather than assigning a textbook. There are numerous benefits to implementing these practices. Students take ownership of their education and feel empowered to fill gaps in knowledge. Students are more prepared for class. It allows course content to match current events in real time. Students learn how to analyze the credibility of various sources. Class conversations are more dynamic. Students develop a better understanding of opinions that differ from their own. Lastly, students are less inclined to believe that the instructor is attempting to influence their personal beliefs and opinions on politics.

How do we teach American Government in the era of “fake news”? The Trump Presidency has seen an increase in political polarization and debate (Jones, 2020). As a result, students in my American government and political science courses have been more aware of political events than in previous years. How can we help direct them to credible sources of media? How do we build their confidence that these sources are, in fact, credible when various political leaders label them as “fake news”? How do we teach them to have respectful dialogue with persons espousing different political views?

Enabling students to analyze political events intelligently creates better political scientists and better civic participants. Citizens who are enabled to digest proposals and actions by their representatives are better prepared to make educated decisions at the ballot box (Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019). The pedagogical technique laid out in this essay

not only improves student knowledge of the American political process but gives students the skills to continue informing themselves for years to come.

In this essay, I propose a technique that empowers students to take ownership of the course. We should guide students in asking critical questions about the political world they live in, and mentor them in researching the answers themselves. My strategy is twofold: 1) letting students decide which topic is covered each week and 2) allowing students to research that topic from their own sources rather than a textbook.

### **Literature**

A growing mass of experts on pedagogy are emphasizing a need for professors to move away from lecture format. Students learn more when we guide them in the pursuit of knowledge than when we force feed them information. As has been known

for some time, “true learning is based on discovery guided by mentoring rather than the transmission of knowledge” (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998, p. 15). The contribution of this essay is to apply this theory to course readings. In my view, textbooks are the literary equivalent of lecture; guided online research is the equivalent of active learning in the classroom. I suggest that we move away from the “sage on the page” of course textbooks.

King (1993) advocates that teachers evolve from being the “sage on the stage” to being a “guide on the side”. She argues that merely transmitting knowledge to students via lecture is outdated in a world where they are “expected to think for themselves, pose and solve complex problems, and generally produce knowledge rather than reproduce it” (King, 1993, p. 30). My position is that textbooks fall victim to the same weaknesses as lecture; they encourage students to reproduce knowledge rather than to produce it by posing and solving complex problems.

We can help students improve their abilities to pose and solve complex problems by guiding them in asking questions. By having students ask the questions themselves, they must tap into their own prior knowledge and experiences and contemplate what is relevant and important (King, 1994). When learning the answers to their own questions, humans anchor new knowledge to previous neural networks of information and thus better retain the new content (Lambiotte & Dansereau 1992).

Lujan and DiCarlo (2005) define learning as “the ability to use resources to find, evaluate, and apply information” (p. 17). Textbooks allow only a narrow version of these skills; however, I contend having

students select among an infinite amount of resources to find answers allows them to master all three skills.

Active learning leads to better learning (King, 1993, p. 31). In the case of American Government, better learning equates to a greater accumulation of knowledge as well as better preparedness for civic engagement (Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019). In improving our American Government courses, we create better citizens in addition to better students. We have a profound responsibility to teach our students how to ask questions, utilize resources, and interpret information in the political sphere. I found the following technique to be successful in accomplishing these goals.

### **Pedagogical Technique**

I tested this technique each semester between Spring 2017 and Spring 2018 in my *Introduction to American Government* courses at Columbus State University. Every week a class vote determined which topic to cover next and what background research was required. The list of topics from which they choose was provided in their syllabus and consisted of the standard topics that are covered in an *Introduction to American Government* course. At the end of each week’s lessons, the class voted on which topic to cover the following week. Using the list of possible topics, the students decided which topic was most appropriate to cover given current events in American politics. The students selected the topic via a group discussion and plurality vote.

After the class decided the topic, I asked “what information does a person need to know to have an intelligent discussion on this topic?” The students then provided a number of factual questions regarding the topic. After deciding what facts, we all had

to know, I asked for “what normative debates can we have about the topic?” The students then discussed which opinion-based topics to debate the following week.

Over the weekend, each student researched the factual and normative questions that we had agreed upon. By Sunday at 5:00 pm, each student submitted his or her answers. Students were allowed to choose their own sources of information. The following week’s lessons were organized similarly to a traditional course where students would have read a textbook chapter over the weekend. For the first portion of the lessons, I covered basic facts and principles. For the remainder of the lessons, we had class discussions. We would then repeat the process of choosing a new topic, homework, and discussion questions at the end of that week’s lessons.

### **Outcomes**

I measured the success of this intervention with anecdotal observations and from the comments of students’ reflections, course evaluations (from Spring 2017), and direct comments.

### **Discussion and Comments**

I found class conversations to be far more dynamic than previous semesters. I also found a higher percentage of students to be prepared for class. Students regularly came to class prepared with questions for me to clarify. They frequently read things in their research that they did not understand (i.e., either they literally did not understand what was happening or they could not understand how it was possible/legal). I found it rewarding to see so many students genuinely were interested in going beyond the basic material.

I like the thought of a class driven agenda. I think through our participation in the class curriculum we are more likely to have more investment in the class. I know I personally am more enthusiastic about something if I have a hand in its inception. I also think that through our personal queries as students we will seek the knowledge more passionately. I feel like I get less from simple regurgitation of textbook information. (Student evaluations)

The weekend assignments were successful in establishing a common set of facts for our discussions. For instance, students who had previously thought that President Obama vacationed to Hawaii at least once per month (Lee, 2013) learned that he went to Hawaii once per year for Christmas. Students who thought that President Trump was in Mar-a-Lago conducting private business (Stefansky, 2017) learned that he was taking state meetings there. Both groups agreed that these trips were expensive for the secret service. While different sources listed different amounts for the cost of each trip, the different calculations provided a reasonable range for us to agree upon. Discussions regarding different answers to factual questions allowed students to begin identifying and analyzing credible sources of news. Establishing agreed upon facts created a more focused debate on the issues.

A particularly successful discussion regarded President Trump’s executive orders prohibiting travel to the United States from select countries in Spring of 2017. The students agreed that the President of the United States does have the right to ban travel from a foreign country but cannot violate other Constitutional rights in doing so. With those points agreed upon, students were

given the freedom to voice their opinion on banning travel from countries that might harbor terrorists. Many students felt we needed to ban travel from those countries because of their risk factors, but not their religion, while other students thought that we should promote and bolster immigration to the United States. Students successfully agreed to disagree and acknowledged that they had a better understanding of the other side's opinion after the discussion. Furthermore, the class concluded that it is much easier to understand another person's point of view when the participants agree on the facts at hand.

### **Textbook**

I found numerous benefits to not assigning a textbook. First, many more students did the reading when it was open source than when I assigned a textbook. Students felt that the assignments were created with a purpose (i.e., they had already decided that these were things that an educated person should know). Students reported that with textbooks they rarely know what they are "supposed to be learning". Creating a list of things that every student should look up is a successful solution to this problem, with or without a textbook.

Because we do not have the traditional textbook, we are forced to find information ourselves and research thoroughly in order to write about the topic. This forces students to learn the material as well as pick up on things we may have missed through discussion. (Student evaluations)

Second, internet-based assignments allow the course to stay current. American politics happens in real-time. Thus, when President Trump tweeted that the Senate should use the "nuclear option" to appoint

Judge Gorsuch, I doubt many American Government textbooks had sections on ending filibuster rules for specific purposes. However, the New York Times (Jentleson, 2017) and Wall Street Journal (Peterson, 2017) both had articles informing people about the "nuclear option". Covering content that matches current events gives the learning even more purpose for students. I regularly reminded the students that one of the major learning objectives for this course was to "intelligently discuss politics with family and friends". Multiple students reported having successfully achieved this objective in their personal communications. They felt prepared to contribute intelligently to political conversations by adding knowledge about how our political system works. One student reported, "I loved this course and being able to choose what we learn about. The content was very interesting as we focused on things that happen now" (Student evaluation).

### **Media Literacy**

Third, I found that assigning students to research the political system online helps them navigate through credible and incredible sources. In an era of "fake news" where some fake news looks credible and some credible news is challenged by our leaders, it can be very difficult for people to know what is true. I feel strongly that my course improved my students' ability to follow current events in an intelligent way.

The format by which Dr. Combes structured this class was highly effective. The homework focused around research. Most of which was relatively easy to find, but it also showed me how lazy I had been when voting or forming an opinion for a side or platform. I liked that we had to find facts, then form our own opinion about a related topic.

Combining current government issues with the founding of the country and how it all started made me much more aware of what is ACTUALLY meant versus what may be interpreted by journalists. This class also taught me how to see through the sea of over-speak and think through what the true issue underneath what is being said or done. (Student evaluation)

### **Empowerment**

During the semester, multiple students expressed to me that they appreciated how much more informed they were about American Government and how empowered they felt to engage in political discourse. Multiple students expressed gratitude that I was able to accomplish this task in a way that did not feel like I was “shoving my opinion down their throats”. One student in particular said:

I’ve never challenged my own viewpoint so much than in this class. The worst part of it is, you’re not some liberal snowflake professor feeding us propaganda. All you do is get us to ask questions, then go research the answer ourselves. As I do more research, I keep learning that I’m wrong about so many things. (Student comment)

Multiple students expressed that our class was a place where a diversity of opinions was valued. Students learned how to see others’ points of view while respectfully voicing their own. For example, students were able to conceptualize the tension between religious freedom and protection from discrimination (i.e., in the case of Evangelical Christian business owners refusing to provide services for same sex weddings). Many students felt that

forcing the bakery to sell a wedding cake was a violation of the exercise clause of the First Amendment while allowing bakeries to refuse service to same sex couples was a form of discrimination. They agreed that one’s opinion on the matter was a function of how one interpreted the exercise clause as well as how one values protecting individuals’ religious values relative to sexual orientation.

Dr. Combes' class has made me dig deep within myself and evaluate what I truly believe. This class made me become more engaged in what’s happening my country and more inclined to do research so that I know how to properly educate those who rely on "fake news" for their information. (Student evaluation)

### **Student Evaluations**

Student evaluations show that the students enjoyed researching the answers to questions far more than they enjoy textbooks.

I feel using a textbook we minimize our data collection as a class and the information comes with a slant of the author. I think most people tend to tune out when they are fed what one personally feels to be rhetoric. I personally enjoy finding the information on my own accord and preparing to discuss the next class. I also feel you absorb more information when digging for the answers rather than having them fed to you. (Student Evaluation)

### **Conclusion**

In today’s divided politics, many in our society are too quick to deem the other side as simply wrong, stupid, evil, or un-American. As political science professors, we can help bring our communities back to respecting various points of view and

engaging in respectful dialogue. To achieve this goal, we need to help students grasp what is factually true. Once they understand the facts, we need to show them where the tradeoffs of each policy are. In seeing both sides of a tradeoff, students can understand that they may value one side of the coin whereas someone else values the other side.

With that said, it is becoming increasingly difficult to get individuals to agree on a common set of facts. Fake news exists. Credible news is attacked from many sides. Credible news is commonly interwoven with biased editorials. To help our students engage in fruitful political discourse, we need to teach them to inform themselves about politics. Guiding them through the process of analyzing the sources of information that they regularly encounter better prepares them for civic engagement. I propose that professors of American Government consider moving away from textbooks and towards having students research our political system using sources that they will more frequently encounter.

Lastly, we want to create citizens who are civically engaged. We want citizens who actively seek out ways to be involved rather than passively accepting what happens. In a similar vein, we want active and passionate students rather than passive receivers of information. Allowing students to vote on which topic that they most want to research gives them agency and teaches them to take ownership of their education. In courses that do not need to be taught in sequence, I recommend that professors consider letting their classes decide what to study next.

## References

- Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University. (1998). *Reinventing undergraduate education: A blueprint for America's research universities*. Stony Brook, NY: Author.
- Jeffrey, A., & Sargrad S. (2019, December). Strengthening democracy with a modern civics education. *Center for American Progress*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/12/14/478750/strengthening-democracy-modern-civics-education/>
- Jentleson, A. (2017, April 3). Mitch McConnell's nuclear trigger finger. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/opinion/mitch-mcconnells-nuclear-trigger-finger.html>
- Jones, J. M. (2020, January). Trump Third Year Sets New Standard for Party Polarization. *Gallup*. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/283910/trump-third-year-sets-new-standard-party-polarization.aspx>
- King, A. (1993). From sage on stage to guide on the side. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 30-35.
- King, A. (1994). Guiding knowledge construction in the classroom: Effects of teaching children how to question and how to explain. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(2), 338-368
- Lambiotte, J. G., & Dansereau, D. F. (1992). Effects of knowledge maps and prior knowledge on recall of science lecture content. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 60(3), 189-201. doi: 10.1080/00220973.1992.9943875
- Lee, T. (2013, March 26). Media ignores lavish Obama vacations, slammed Bush for mountain biking. *Breitbart*. Retrieved from <http://www.breitbart.com/big->

- journalism/2013/03/26/obamas-vacation-more-lavishly-than-bushes/  
Lujan, H. L., & DiCarlo, S. E. (2006). Too much teaching, not enough learning: What is the solution? *Advances in Physiological Education*, 30, 17-22. doi: 10.1152/advan.00061.2005
- Peterson, K. (2017, April 5). Senate is running out of compromises to avoid 'nuclear option' in Gorsuch vote. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/senate-is-running-out-of-compromises-to-avoid-nuclear-option-in-gorsuch-vote-1491384608>

- Stefansky, E. (2017, September 17). What is Trump hiding at Mar-A-Lago? *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/09/trump-mar-a-lago-visitor-logs>

---

NATHAN J. COMBES is an adjunct professor of political science at Columbus State University. His research focuses on African politics, democratization, and pedagogy of political science.