

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My Approach to Teaching: My primary objective as teacher of political science is to enable my students to think logically and clearly about political questions. In many ways, this objective overlaps with one of the key questions embodied in my research program—the question of whether, and to what extent, the public is equipped to comprehend and apply new political information in their decision-making processes. I think it is more important for students to emerge from an introductory course with a clear understanding of how politics works than a battery of factual knowledge, much of which may not be applicable when they encounter future political science courses or are called on to think about political questions later in life. That is not to say that factual knowledge is unimportant; some degree of information is needed for any political reasoning. However, knowledge is easier to acquire when it is needed than the ability to make reasoned judgments.

Coupled with this objective, particularly in more advanced courses, is my interest in encouraging students to better understand the study of politics can be approached using *scientific* processes. Students are often under the impression that “science” is something that one can only do with a Bunsen burner and a lab coat, but scientific approaches can also lead to worthwhile knowledge in social inquiry. Whether students are applying quantitative or qualitative methods, the scientific method—developing a strong theory, testable hypotheses, and an appropriate research and case-selection strategy—should be applied rigorously. While not all political questions lend themselves to scientific inquiry, when students are called on to do research on empirical questions they should be equipped to apply the appropriate research method for their question with rigor. This approach is, in particular, at the core of my teaching of political science research methods for undergraduates.

The key approach I use in my teaching to accomplish these objectives is to engage students in them. One way I find to be effective is to sell the material with an enthusiastic approach. The courses I have taught in the past have generally been required courses, not electives, which often leads students to be less excited about the material than they might otherwise be; this attitude is particularly common among students in the research methods course. Engaging students with real-world examples, an abundance of enthusiasm, and a healthy dose of humor seems to help most students over their initial lack of interest in the material. Particularly in the methods course, I’ve found that the use of texts that cover the material in an accessible way is effective at disarming students.

I also have carried forward my experience at Millsaps College, a small liberal arts institution focused on undergraduate teaching, to my subsequent positions at large research universities. I firmly believe in an “open door” policy, whereby students are free to drop in regardless of whether or not they arrive during posted office hours, and in being accessible to students in and outside the classroom. From this experience I have also decided that it is important to me to teach in a context where colleagues and the administration also place a high value on faculty teaching meaningful, rigorous courses, even if this leaves less time for faculty to conduct research.

Perhaps most important, though, in the methods course is ensuring that students recognize the connection between the statistical methods I am teaching and the substantive problems they are trying to understand through their own research and readings in other courses.

Students who may be initially reluctant to “do math” often find it much more rewarding when they come to understand that it allows them to analyze the real world in a more rigorous fashion.

In upper-division courses, I tend to emphasize the continued development of critical thinking and writing skills. In all of my upper-division courses, I base the bulk of student assessment on out-of-class essay assignments (research papers of varying lengths and take-home essay exams), coupled with assigned readings from textbooks, scholarly books, and research articles that cover the major themes of the course in significant depth. I mostly devote class time to lectures on the more difficult concepts raised in the readings, coupled with seminar discussion of the broader conclusions of the readings and connections between the theoretical and practical realms of politics.

I have also integrated instructional technology in my courses, where I have found it helpful. At Duke, SLU, and TAMU, I have made use of university computer labs to include hands-on data analysis instruction and exercises in my methods course. I also had students in my American Political System course at Duke produce on-line state politics journals, which have the dual purpose of keeping students engaged in real world events beyond the classroom and an exercise in improving their writing and critical thinking skills. In my American Government courses at SLU, Tulane, and TAMU, I have used the university’s e-Learning systems (WebCT, Blackboard, and ANGEL, respectively) to administer online quizzes on the readings that students are expected to complete prior to coming to class, which has helped encourage students to read the course materials. Generally, students have been receptive to these approaches, and I hope to make further use of them in the future, although I have found the need to be cautious as there are certainly times at which information technology is more distracting than helpful in the classroom.

Overall, I find teaching political science to be a very rewarding experience; I often learn things from my students that enhance my understanding of politics or the world at large that I might not otherwise encounter. The central reward of teaching to me, however, is that it is an opportunity for me to both honor and pass forward to others the contributions that a large number of teachers and professors have made, and continue to make, to my life. My hope is that I can make similar contributions to my students’ lives and thus encourage them in the pursuit of lifelong learning.

Finally, I should mention that I am open to a variety of approaches and perspectives when teaching courses, despite my orientation towards quantitative approaches in my research. While some of the upper division courses I teach do require students to apply quantitative methods—for example, it would be difficult to understand or conduct meaningful research into public opinion or voting behavior without the use of statistical methods—many of them do not. In particular, the course in Southern politics I developed at Duke and also taught at Tulane, based on a directed study course I taught at Millsaps, relies heavily on qualitative research and historical narrative.

I strongly support the notion that, while quantitative methods have an important place in the study of politics, there are other, equally-valid approaches that may be more appropriate for certain problems or may be able to explore questions that quantitative methods are unable to answer. Perhaps equally importantly, I enjoy teaching a wide variety of courses within the fields of American political institutions and political behavior and look forward to developing and teaching new courses in the future.

Strengths and Weaknesses in the Classroom and Among Colleagues: The most basic challenge I face as a classroom teacher is that I am by nature a very shy person—the experience of lecturing in front of a group of people, or even interacting with individuals that I don’t know very well, is quite uncomfortable for me. While I have worked very hard to overcome this anxiety,

I have occasionally been told by observers who are unfamiliar with my teaching that my shyness and related mannerisms sometimes leave an initial impression of disinterest or aloofness. I think that my classroom evaluations show that over the course of a given semester students warm up to me and are receptive to my approach, and my former chairs would say that I was a good colleague in their department.

In general, my evaluations as an instructor have been positive, particularly in the methods course. Students have uniformly noted my enthusiasm for and command of the material. However, in lecture courses I have occasionally received criticism for sometimes being difficult to hear or understand, and in the first semester I taught (Fall 2000) some students believed I rushed through the material. I have worked diligently to address these deficiencies, and both my student evaluations and informal feedback from students and fellow faculty have improved markedly as a result.

Research Interests and Plans

While teaching is important to my role as a scholar, my research agenda is equally valuable to me. Before discussing my specific research agenda, however, I would like to briefly mention that while my formal fields of examination were American politics and quantitative research methods, I have also pursued substantial research in comparative politics and intend to continue to do so. For example, arguably the most important chapter of my dissertation deals with voting behavior and public opinion within the Netherlands. This emphasis on considering and testing theories of politics outside the United States dovetails with my conception of the discipline of political science as being somewhat artificially divided between those who study the United States and those who study other countries. Much as I appreciate and value the opportunity to do interdisciplinary research, I also find great value in being able to bridge subdisciplines in political science with my own work.

As I discussed in my statement of teaching philosophy, one key research interest of mine is the question of democratic competence and how best to measure that phenomenon. My dissertation research and other research with my committee chair, Harvey Palmer, has focused on the topic of political sophistication¹—how it should be conceptualized and measured and the impact of voters' sophistication on how they make political judgments, moving beyond the classical assumption in most political behavior research that the explanatory power of key variables is constant across the electorate. In this research, I show that voters who have higher levels of sophistication have systematically different approaches to making voting decisions and arriving at opinions on issues and governmental performance.

In the future, I hope to broaden this line of research to gain a better understanding of how sophistication interacts with the use of cognitive shortcuts by voters, field further research into what types of survey questions best tap the concept of political sophistication, further investigate the use of quantitative methods to estimate sophistication and incorporate those estimates into larger analyses, and examine whether civic education efforts—including political science courses—are effective vehicles for improving the participation and democratic competence of citizens.

¹Political sophistication is also known as political expertise, political awareness, and civic competence, and is related to political knowledge. A thorough review of the use of the concept in political science appears in the second chapter of my dissertation, available online at <http://www.enlawrence.com/>.

A second research interest of mine is in legislative behavior and the linkages between constituents and legislators and between the legislative branch and the executive and judiciary. My past research in this field has focused on how legislators make decisions on salient issues (such as the impeachment of former president Bill Clinton and on amending the constitution to authorize a federal law prohibiting flag burning) and the voting behavior of citizens in legislative elections, both in the United States and in other democracies. My recent article in *Political Research Quarterly* falls within this line of research.

My future research interests in this area include the development of a more concrete understanding of the legislator-constituent relationship and helping to resolve the paradox of legislator responsiveness to constituency preferences, and research into the effects of term limits and other institutional changes on legislators' behavior, including "shirking" of voter preferences by legislators.

My final area of research interest is in broadening the availability of advanced statistical methods to political scientists and other social scientists. I have been assisting in the development of the Debian and Quantian projects, which produce non-commercial variants of the Linux operating system; the latter project produces a free, "ready-to-run" Linux distribution on a compact disc that includes a complete environment for statistical and scientific computing, including the *GNU R* statistical computing system and a full implementation of the \LaTeX typesetting system. My contributions to this effort have included packaging *R* components for the system and work on basic infrastructure tools, as well as publicizing these tools to fellow political scientists (most notably, through an article that appeared in *The Political Methodologist* in 2005). Ongoing plans for this research program include an effort to promote the use of Quantian by political scientists as a substitute for proprietary software, thus lowering the expense of operating computer labs for undergraduate and graduate courses; improvements in the usability of the software; and the development of *R* programs that make it easier for social scientists to estimate common models, automate post-estimation diagnostics, and produce professional-quality tables and graphics.

I also am interested in developing new approaches to properly incorporate estimates from item-response theory models (such as Poole and Rosenthal's NOMINATE and the Clinton-Jackman-Rivers model) as covariates in second-stage models of individual behavior, such as legislative roll-call voting and citizens' voting. The traditional approach (simply including the estimates as "known" quantities in the second-stage model) leads to erroneous estimates of the error variances associated with such covariates, as they assume the covariates are the product of a random process rather than the result of predictions from another estimator. These improvements would help improve my substantive research on the role political sophistication plays in voters' decision-making; I presented preliminary results from this research at the 2007 Political Methodology section meeting in State College, Pennsylvania, and am currently preparing this research for publication.

Over the medium-to-long term, I anticipate publishing the main findings of my dissertation in several journal articles and producing articles for *Political Analysis* detailing the latent variable estimation techniques used in my measurement of political sophistication and in formulating joint predictions of correlated ordinal outcomes. I also anticipate fielding survey-based experiments in measuring the effect of political expertise to strengthen and complement my existing findings based on secondary data sources.