

# Teaching US Politics in the Age of Trump: International Perspectives

## INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING US POLITICS IN THE AGE OF TRUMP: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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### “Why Trump?”

In recent semesters, beginning courses on US politics with a survey on questions that students want to address has yielded the same results. Before the 2016 election, students—in these cases, mostly of Swiss and German origins—were equally concerned about the causes and effects of party polarization, the “costs” of American democracy, and the influence of the media and lobbies. Although these questions are still at the center of many discussions, a resounding “why?” pervades the classroom whenever the Trump administration is mentioned. They ask, “Why could someone who has never held any public office and lacks a strong tie to any political party still be elected to the nation’s highest office while speaking and acting so divisively, and how has that impacted the American democracy?” At the end of the semester, students report that although they better understand how the US system works and why it now may favor polarizing candidates, they are not fully convinced that it can be effectively shielded from democratic erosion. Referencing *Federalist Paper No. 51*, students recognize that the system was designed to withstand the grasp of not particularly angelic executives; however, intention and reality may diverge.

Students are not alone in having difficulty in making sense of and deciding how to react to the Trump administration, as the ongoing discussions among political scientists convey. In addition to asking “why,” scholars are discussing the effects of the Trump presidency on the classroom. Panels at annual meetings of the American Political Science Association have explored ways to increase students’ readiness to become politically active, and a symposium in *New Political Science* analyzed transformative practices (Romano and Daum 2018). Debates in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and online forums suggest a heightened awareness for questions of teacher neutrality and the role of emotions and for the challenges in educating critical readers who can maneuver the world of online (mis)information.

However, these discussions tend to focus on the US context, overlooking the fact that American politics is taught around the world, in countries whose historic relations with the United States shape public—and classroom—debates as much as current politics. That is, we automatically adopt a comparative perspective when we discuss US politics in international classrooms, and we tend to continuously question the effects of US politics and policy on the international realm—specifically, our own geopolitical context. Contrary to what happens when US students examine their own political system from a comparative perspective (Baron, Blair, and Grossman 2019), our discussions may end less

than optimistically. (Or they may be regarded as futile in the first place: an exchange student from Hong Kong once told one of the guest editors of this spotlight that he had been wondering the entire semester why his fellow students had such heated debates on political ideas; why care about ideas if individual citizens have such little impact?)

This spotlight invites readers to what is intended to be a more international conversation on the challenges of teaching US politics, in general, and particularly considering the standing of the current administration. The conversation takes us to campuses in Europe (i.e., Germany and the United Kingdom), in two Asian countries with a historically ambiguous relationship to the United States (i.e., South Korea and Japan), and in Australia and the Middle East (i.e., Lebanon). ■

### REFERENCES

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### TRUMP AND THE TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP IN CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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When the newly appointed US Ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, arrived in Berlin, he immediately caused a media firestorm. Ambassador Grenell flaunted diplomatic protocol by making a series of statements that appeared to undermine the current German government, support right-wing political parties, and criticize the “blatant anti-Americanism” in German media.<sup>1</sup> Former German ambassador to the United States, Wolfgang Ischinger, retorted via Twitter: “Never tell the host country what to do, if you want to stay out of trouble.”<sup>2</sup> In Germany, Grenell’s contentious diplomacy has become emblematic of the deterioration of US–German relations since the election of President Trump. Trump has regularly taken Germany to task for its trade policies and defense spending, even threatening to take punitive action including tariff increases and withdrawal from NATO. In turn, Germany, more than any other major ally, sees its relations with the United States as having severely worsened since Trump’s election, and Germans currently view the United States more negatively than at any other point since the end of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

This state of affairs has generated an intense demand on the part of politicians, students, and the general public to better understand American politics, both domestic and international. US politics is followed almost as intensively as domestic politics. Both the media and policy makers frequently reach out to