When Plato Meets Popkin: Combining Political Philosophy and Empirical Content in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT   Given that students often express a desire for course content to be more "relevant" and applicable to their lives, I describe one method for effectively addressing this concern through the organization of the course syllabus. The content of empirically driven courses can be framed within the context of philosophically driven normative questions. In other words, instructors can explicitly construct course narratives that frame the empirically based course content as an attempt to answer (or, at least, shed new light on) important, relevant, and on-going questions raised by political philosophy. I offer examples from two of my own courses, Political Psychology and Local Politics, and discuss the various pedagogical and instructional advantages of such a method.

As college and university instructors, we sometimes find ourselves in a situation where we are teaching what we are confident is a fascinating and exciting topic, only to be met with blank stares, frequent glances at the clock, and perhaps a question from a brave student like: "how is this relevant?" or "why does this matter?" As political scientists teaching upper-division courses in our areas of specialization, we tend to be enthusiastic about the minutiae of the theoretical paradigms that we study and the latest findings of the research strategies that we use. It can be discouraging when our students do not immediately see or appreciate the relevance or importance of the topics that we devote our entire careers to studying and understanding. We often take for granted that what is so obvious to us is not always immediately apparent to even our most devoted students.

In this article I share one method that I use in my upper-division empirically based courses to help students appreciate the significance of the concepts and materials that they are asked to learn. I make a deliberate and explicit effort to frame the narrative of the course syllabus around a normative question (or questions) drawn from political philosophy. Then, the primary content for the course is presented as an attempt to help "answer" the normative "question" posed by the political philosophers. I often reserve the first unit of the course for readings and discussions drawn from the classical political theory canon that directly bear on the empirical and research-driven topics for the course. I identify a perennial question of interest to political philosophers and present different theoretical perspectives on the question. Then, I

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organize the remainder of the course as an attempt to empirically answer the question identified by political philosophers, or at the very least, to shed some new light on a question that may never be fully answered. In essence, I explicitly present the narrative to my students as something along these lines: "Hundreds of years ago, a famous philosopher made an important and exciting argument [the course narrative]. What do you think of this argument? Was he or she right? Here are some different tools that we can use [the bulk of the course content] to help try to answer that question, or at least understand from a new and interesting perspective."

Although many of us undoubtedly already use this method (or some variant of it) in our upper-level courses, I hope this article contains something profitable for those who are interested in drawing a more explicit connection between philosophical and empirical approaches in our classroom teaching. First, I provide two examples of how I have used this organizational approach in my own upper-division courses. Because of my teaching and research interests, both of the courses are in the American politics subfield: Political Psychology (behavior) and Local Politics (institutions). Then, I discuss some of the various advantages of this approach, for both the instructor and students.

EXAMPLE 1: POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Although instructors can take several different approaches to a political psychology course, I emphasize the American political behavior subfield in my particular course, specifically in regards to voter knowledge and decision making. One of the core recurring themes throughout the various units in my course is the bottom-line question: "How smart is the American voter?"

To emphasize the relevance and importance of topics like "how voters decide" and "how much they know about politics," I frame the narrative of the syllabus around a theoretical debate between

the competing perspectives of Plato and Thomas Jefferson. First, we read excerpts from Plato's *Republic*, specifically the passages that discuss the organization of the ideal political community and the philosopher-kings. We also pay close attention to the Ship of State allegory in Book 6, especially the comparison of a political leader to a physician (488 a-e). We discuss what the word "democracy" meant to Plato and how it is similar and different to how we think of democracy in today's world. The goal is to help students understand why Plato had an unfavorable opinion of democracy as a form of government and why he had a cynical and pessimistic view of the ability of common people to make competent political decisions or to know what was in their own best interests.

We then contrast that perspective with selected quotations from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2003) and a selection of Thomas Jefferson's quotations on the virtues of self-government. These readings, in contrast to Plato, present a much more optimistic, Enlightenment-based view of the ability of people to arrive at rational decisions and competently govern themselves. The narrative of this unit becomes the question: "Who was right, Plato or Jefferson? Are most people 'smart enough' to be able to govern themselves well in a democracy ... or not?"

research on political sophistication (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991, 1993, 1996) as well as public opinion surveys measuring levels of political knowledge in the American public (including the "Pew Research News IQ Quiz"; http://pewresearch.org/politicalquiz/). We try to get an idea of what Americans do and do not know about their political system and the political world. This unit is often a bit of a "downer" for the students as they are confronted with the less-than-flattering reality of the limits the public's political knowledge. (Indeed, I recall one student putting his head on his desk at the end of class and bemoaning: "This is so depressing...")

For the second fundamental assumption ("people need to have an opinion about that knowledge") we look at the directional model of voting (Macdonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1995; Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989) and discuss how people can often hold strong feelings on one policy issue but indifferent or ambivalent feelings on another issue. A discussion of the phenomenon of "single-issue voting" and "hard" versus. "easy" issues (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Conover et al. 1982) follows.

The examination of the third assumption ("people need to be able to competently translate their knowledge and opinions into 'correct' voting decisions that best reflect their preferences") is

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If I have done my job well, students will invariably begin to ask questions like: "what does 'smart enough' mean?" and "how do we tell if someone is 'smart enough' or not?" and even "isn't it more than a little insulting that we're even asking this question?" It is hoped that they will have begun to critically analyze some of the core fundamental tenants of democratic theory. At this point in the course, I introduce students to what I call some of the "fundamental assumptions of democracy." In other words, for a strong and vibrant democracy to function, some basic, minimal requirements need to be met (at least, from a political psychology perspective). These include:

1. People need to know something about politics.
2. People need to have an opinion about that knowledge.
3. People need to be able to competently translate their political knowledge and opinions into "correct" voting decisions that best reflect their preferences.

The remaining units of the course present recent research in political psychology that directly addresses each of these particular democratic assumptions. The narrative I now present to my students is: "Plato said that most of us aren't smart enough to govern ourselves, but Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers said that we are. Who's right? How can empirical political science, in this case political psychology, help us try to answer this important question?" To help preview the relevance of the course content, I try to emphatically emphasize that because we all live in a liberal democratic form of government, it is important to examine whether some of the minimal requirements for this form of government are effectively being met or not.

To examine the first fundamental assumption of democracy ("people need to know something about politics") we look at

the longest unit of the three. We begin with Converse's (1964) conception of ideological constraint and the corresponding argument that only a small portion of the population would qualify as an "ideologue" or "near ideologue," able to understand the meaning and significance of the liberal-conservative ideological spectrum and interpret the political world accordingly. Then, we look at Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) study that suggests that those who are politically sophisticated (a small portion of the population) are better able to match their stated political preferences with the "correct" presidential candidate whose platform matches their preferences (258). At this point, the weight of the evidence that we have examined is weighing heavily in favor of Plato's elitist perspective.

Next, we examine models of voter decision-making. I introduce the students to online versus memory-based models (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995), correct voting (Lau and Redlawsk 1997), and the concept of political heuristics as described and analyzed by Popkin (1991) and Lau and Redlawsk (2001). To one degree or another, all these studies suggest that although Americans may not easily qualify as "political sophisticates," most people, through the use of mental shortcuts and online processing, can do a pretty good job of voting "correctly." I show students Lau and Redlawsk's (1997) study that suggests that people make a "correct" voting decision about 75% of the time. I point out that although Plato originally started the debate nearly 2,500 years ago, recent political psychology research would seem to support Jefferson's perspective that ordinary people are, more or less, able to make competent voting decisions and govern themselves effectively in a democratic system.

Finally, we come back to the original readings from Plato, Tocqueville, and Jefferson and reexamine the question raised at the outset of the course: are people "smart enough" to govern

themselves in a representative democracy … or not? I devote a class period to ask students a series of discussion questions, including: "Do you think that the fundamental assumptions of democracy are being met, or not?"; "What are the consequences of this research for the future of American democracy?"; "What should be done (if anything) to address levels of political knowledge in the public sphere?" Depending on the interests of the instructor and students, this discussion could also be broadened further to examine the institutional requirements for democracy and how these might interact with the "fundamental assumptions" that are outlined above (I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this additional topic of discussion). For example: "Is the existence of free elections with a secret ballot a sufficient condition for 'democracy' to exist even if the citizens might lack the ability to cast an informed vote in those elections?"

EXAMPLE 2: LOCAL POLITICS

This course starts with a unit on some of the philosophical arguments as to the virtues of small political communities. Given that many political science courses focus on national-level politics, the objective of these readings is to challenge the conventional wisdom that small, local political institutions or communities are somehow less important or less relevant than politics at the national level. We start by reading an excerpt from Book 5 of Pla-

liberal ideal of becoming an independent, autonomous, and virtuous individual, it provides a framework through which the students will see why learning about school board elections and planning and zoning commissions is important and relevant to their civic lives.

Many reading selections are appropriate for addressing the link between political community size and the development of civic/individual virtue; the two readings that I use are selections from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2003) and an essay on political participation by Benjamin Barber (1988).

In the Tocqueville reading, Chapter 14 of Book 1, Tocqueville describes the "real advantages which American society derives from a democratic government" (269). He argues that Americans are constantly on the move and that participating in the public sphere is "the only pleasure an American knows" (Tocqueville 2003, 284). Tocqueville observes that America's democratic form of self-government is not very efficient and that "the people frequently conduct public business very badly" (285). However, this public activity results in multiple advantages and benefits for America's citizens: we acquire "a certain degree of self-respect" and are "better informed and more active" (285) as a result. In the second reading, Benjamin Barber (1988) makes the normative argument that political participation in the public sphere is "a vital condition of meaningful citizenship" (294) and that such

> By framing the content of the course around the normative question of whether participation in local political communities is necessary for realizing the liberal ideal of becoming an independent, autonomous, and virtuous individual, it provides a framework through which the students will see why learning about school board elections and planning and zoning commissions is important and relevant to their civic lives.

to's *Laws* where the Athenian stranger explains that the ideal size of a political community is 5,040 citizens because is it sufficient to maintain a "moderate way of life." We then read Chapter 9 of Book 2 of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* where the argument is made in favor of a small unitary state that is "neither too large for good government, nor too small for self-maintenance" (Rousseau 1968, 90). Rousseau argues that personal relationships are important in a political community and that people in large polities may never have the chance to personally meet and get to know the vast majority of their compatriots. ("How can a sense of community ever be fostered among a nation of strangers?") We also read Brutus #1 from the Anti-Federalist Papers. Brutus argues that leaders of large republics are necessarily far removed from the people that they govern, and this leads to lower levels of political efficacy on the part of the citizens. Like Rousseau, Brutus also argues that it is difficult to maintain a common sense of community in large, heterogeneous political units.

The next set of readings directly addresses the primary organizing normative question for the course: to what extent are small political communities better than large political communities at fostering civic virtue and encouraging excellence of character? For the most part, this is a course on local political governmental institutions and participation in local politics. By framing the content of the course around the normative question of whether participation in local political communities is necessary for realizing the

active participation is essential to producing self-reflective and autonomous individuals.

After this theoretical introduction, the remainder of the course deals with the "nitty-gritty" of local political institutions, elections, and issues. We talk about how local governments are organized, how budgets are put together, what planning and zoning commissions do, how local electoral campaigns compare to national campaigns, and so on. I also devote roughly a third of the course to an experiential learning city council simulation (Woodworth, Gump, and Forrester 2005) in which students are required to assume roles in a fictitious city government and participate in the policy-making process, whether as an elected official or a member of the community. (See Redlawsk and Wilson 2009 for a detailed description of this simulation and its pedagogical benefits.)

Throughout the course, we continually revisit the questions raised at the beginning of the course. Is a strong mayor form of city government more effective than a council-manager system in terms of encouraging public participation in a local community? Is fostering good citizenship and individual virtue an appropriate role for a local political community (as Barber suggests), or is that best left to private organizations, churches, and families? If participation in local politics is necessary for developing democratic citizenship, what are the implications that roughly three-quarters of American citizens, on average, decline to

participate in local elections (Hajnal and Lewis 2003, 646)? Is the act of voting itself the most important way that citizens can or should meaningfully participate in local political communities, or can other avenues of participation bring about the beneficial effects that Barber describes?

In sum, my objectives are to help the students see the relevance and importance of the course material by framing the content as an examination of important normative questions and concerns drawn from the classic debates in political theory. In this way, students will be better equipped to see how the politics of local political communities affect their lives. They will also be better able to decide for themselves if it is worth their time and effort, either now or in the future, to become more informed citizens and get involved in the political process at the local level.

CONCLUSION

These are only two examples of how to meaningfully combine normative, philosophical questions and empirically driven research content in an undergraduate course syllabus. Although these examples feature courses in American politics, this approach could easily be adapted and used for syllabi in other fields such as comparative politics or international relations. There is plenty of material in the political theory canon to inform and provide a substantive framework for many empirically driven course content topics.

Aside from the simple goal of attempting to increase students' perceived relevance of the course material, making a deliberate

sophisticated applications, if students are to understand them" (135). They further argue that this repetitive approach increases student mastery of the material because it most closely conforms to how real-world skill development occurs: through practice and repetition combined with ever-increasing complexity. As described previously, my approach accomplishes these goals because it requires students to return again and again to the same fundamental normative question(s) while each course unit adds another layer of sophistication and nuance to the issue.

Some of my students have expressed appreciation for an explicit "meta-narrative" given to the course when I use this approach. They reported that it is much easier to see how the various units relate to each other as well as to the overarching normative question motivating the course content when an explicit conceptual "map" is given to them at the outset of the course.

Furthermore, evidence indicates that arranging course material with an explicit meta-narrative enhances student memory of course content (see Lang et al. 1995; Schank and Morson 1995). Also, this approach gives students ample opportunities to apply higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and evaluation (Anderson and Krathwohl 2000; Bloom 1984) because they are repeatedly required to evaluate the extent to which the empirical course content provides persuasive evidence either for or against the original normative argument that organizes the course.

From a purely practical perspective, this approach also helps students "ease" into the course content with something they are likely more comfortable and familiar with. Most undergraduates

Finally, this approach helps us to critically evaluate the "usefulness" and meaningful contribution that our courses, as well as our own research, makes to important normative questions in our discipline, as well as the lives of our students.

connection between political theory and the various other subfields in upper-level undergraduate courses has many other advantages. From the standpoint of instructors of nontheory courses (like myself), it helps us become more familiar with, and thus more appreciative of, the contribution and historical prominence of political theory in political science. It also gives us the opportunity to seek out and engage colleagues with different specializations to ask for advice on what normative questions can be used to frame course content or how to more effectively integrate the various subfields in our course syllabi. Finally, this approach helps us to critically evaluate the "usefulness" and meaningful contribution that our courses, as well as our own research, makes to important normative questions in our discipline, as well as the lives of our students.

From the students' standpoint, organizing an empirically driven course around a fundamental philosophical debate has several advantages. Perhaps most importantly, this approach enhances student learning and comprehension. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) explain that "when important problems and questions anchor the curriculum, a clear overarching purpose for student learning and performance is established" (134). They argue that course syllabi ought to be arranged in a "spiral," rather than linear, fashion. "Big ideas, important tasks, and ever-deepening inquiry must *recur*, in ever-increasing complexity and through engaging problems and

are not well-versed in the methodologies of empirical analysis or familiar with the nature of academic debates or fields of research. Most of them, however, are coming into upper-division classes equipped with the basic critical thinking skills necessary for reading and understanding theoretical arguments, which makes it easier for the students to start off the course with an exploration of a substantive theoretical debate.

To conclude, organizing a course using this approach provides students with an increased sense of relevance to the concepts and material that they are required to learn in our courses. They will hopefully be better able to answer the "why does this matter?" question on their own. Students often appreciate the perspective that the questions that we discuss in class are sometimes thousands of years old and that what I teach them is merely the latest attempt, using different tools and approaches, to answer those same perennial questions. At the very least, it gives us as instructors increased opportunities to share with our students what it is that makes us so enthusiastic and excited about the political world, and how students can benefit from taking a more active and informed role in it.

reviewers for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article. It is much stronger as a result. ■

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