

Strategies for Teaching American Politics in Turbulent Times: Webinar Review

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The shocking pace of the second Trump Administration's actions—from sweeping tariffs to deportations without due process—has created an unparalleled constitutional crisis in the United States. Professors of American politics grappling with current events likewise face unprecedented challenges in teaching American politics in the classroom. Concerns about cuts to research and teaching funds, state regulations, and heightened student anxiety only scratch the surface of the myriad trials scholars of American politics face in lecture halls, office hours, and seminars. To help address these questions, APSA organized a webinar on June 5, 2025, on “Strategies for Teaching American Politics in Turbulent Times.” The webinar brought together five seasoned experts for a discussion about practical solutions for educators. Robert C. Lieberman (Johns Hopkins University) moderated the conversation. He was joined by Marjorie Hershey (Indiana University), Megan Ming Francis (University of Washington), Kenneth Roberts (Cornell University), and Allison Rank (SUNY Oswego) for a discussion about how they are rethinking teaching American politics given the unprecedented political environment. The four guests each brought a unique perspective to the conversation given the diverse institutions they have taught at over the years. The panelists agreed on the importance of teaching American politics today, encouraging a return to the fundamentals of American political science, student engagement, and the cultivation of democratic classrooms which can prevent further political polarization.

FOCUS ON THE BASICS

The panelists agreed that American politics, particularly Introduction to American Politics, should be taught as potentially the only time undergraduate students will formally learn about the political structure of the country where they live, work, and act as citizens. This implies that professors should focus on the fundamentals of the American political system and policy process, not on the canon that scholars use for conference papers and academic discussions. By focusing on the basics of the American constitutional system and the major actors and events that have driven its evolution, faculty can prevent the classroom from turning into a place that is separate from the real world.

Megan Ming Francis remarked that her teaching has changed very little over the last decade even though American politics has changed dramatically because the basics are the core of the course structure and schedule. She emphasized that the role of professors of American politics is to give students the foundation and then pose questions that help them understand it is the grey area of politics that is of real interest. The Socrat-

ic method in practice can provoke students into deciding what makes a democracy, and how does this work in America given the country's history and constitutional structure.

Allison Rank agreed with Francis but explained how the order of her course syllabus has changed since the first Trump administration to meet the challenge of these tumultuous times and an altered digital and media landscape. The media section of her course is now taught directly after the introductory lecture and her students are assigned to start a journal for their media habits which follows the remaining duration of the course. Incorporating media literacy training into introductory courses is now a benchmark of a good American politics course.

ENGAGE STUDENTS WITH THE MOMENT

The panelists echoed the motto of “meeting the students where they are” throughout the seventy-five minute conversation. This means setting the right pace and difficulty level for the course material, as well as connecting key concepts to the areas of students' lives where politics are most likely to affect them. Meeting the students where they are also necessitates awareness among educational professionals in how American politics has transformed over the last two decades. Hershey provided the example of expanded presidential powers as an explanation. Executive orders cannot be taught in 2025 the same way they were in 1995, for instance, as they have increased in frequency and policy area. Just as teachers of American politics have had to adapt to this reality, the changes and what they mean for the integrity of American democracy can be explained and debated with students. Engaging students with current events is therefore also interlinked to rigorously teaching the basics of American politics while putting questions to the students at the heart of the educational model.

Roberts provided a more explicit example of historical comparison which can be useful to instructors and students alike. Comparing the Republican party's reaction to the Watergate scandal in the 1970s versus current government crises offers a key demonstration that the institutional checks and balances in the US Constitution are not being enforced by the same institutions in the same way decades later. Moreover, comparing the dangers of the second Trump administration to democratic backsliding in states like Hungary and Brazil can further drive home concepts – like checks and balances – in an interesting and understandable way to students.

In terms of more practical, daily solutions, educators can also consider building a dedicated “current events day” into their course syllabus. Rank has done so in her courses to directly

integrate public scholarship and news events into each week's main themes. Hershey, on the other hand, proposed starting each class with a short discussion of a current event related to the class topic. Beginning lectures and seminars in this way helps students reconnect with American politics after attending other classes.

A final consideration in making students interested in American politics is making the classroom a democratic environment. In order to discuss democracy, the classroom must also represent a place where democratic functions—like disagreement, diversity of thought, and mutual respect—dominate. Francis recommended adopting her method of having seminar groups decide the classroom rules of conduct together. This ensures they are all on the same page for creating a respectful community for discussion and reflection, and gives students a direct role in the process. In a hyper-polarized political environment both within and outside the lecture hall, creating a classroom based on rules of mutual respect is critical.

CIVICS EQUALS AMERICAN POLITICS

One serious question raised in the webinar meeting was whether and how new state regulations about civics education are affecting courses on American politics. There was agreement among the panelists that political science departments should not wait for state regulators to define civics education. Instead, they should pitch American politics to state regulators as civics education in and of itself. Francis and Hershey, both in using knowledge about the Supreme Court as an example, referenced that teaching foundational concepts in American politics and asking students to think critically about their role as citizens within a society is a part of civics education.

Rank went a step further in arguing that civic education can be brought to the forefront of not only American politics education, but also other disciplines. She elaborated that engineers, for instance, can be asked the civics ethics questions about what they are being asked to do. American political science can lead the charge by helping undergraduate students to make sense of civic literacy and engagement with democratic processes in their daily lives and fields.

Another strategy to make American politics courses an exercise in good civics is asking students to justify their classroom arguments based on evidence. It is the role of the instructor to encourage students to express their arguments and to do so in an evidence-informed manner. Hershey gave the example of an assignment from her coursework: requiring students to write an essay with the opposite policy side to what they believe, and then debating the students in the class who wrote on the side they actually believe in. This helps students to see the value in engaging with those of differing beliefs and the importance of bringing evidence to these discussions.

DISCUSS REGIMES, NOT JUST DOCUMENTS

Kenneth Roberts, as the comparative politics expert on the panel, stressed the importance of discussing regime types and regime change in American politics classes. He pointed out that no constitution can fully cover what can and cannot take place in a democratic order. The present moment therefore requires encouraging students to fully identify the features of democracies and autocracies, and to understand how democratic backsliding and competitive authoritarianism take hold. As another example, Roberts mentioned that the Southern states could have been classified as authoritarian prior to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Teaching students about sub-national authoritarianism and how it can take hold in federal systems is therefore an additional comparative politics concept which American politics scholars should educate themselves about and subsequently adopt. Academics can open dialogues both within and outside of their university departments to ensure that this heavily polarized moment in American politics is met with an understanding of comparative politics and international relations. As Roberts concluded, professors of American politics should avoid teaching American exceptionalism as this is not the first and will certainly not be the last democracy to face threats of this magnitude.

CONCLUSION

The panel ended on the somber note that scholars of American politics bear some of the responsibility for how civic life has gotten to such an existential place in the United States. The discipline must now rise to the challenge of teaching American politics in a way that helps students understand the threats to the constitutional order while also encouraging conservative students to speak up and enter into a constructive dialogue with liberal students. Positive role model demonstration by educators is key: mutual respect with students and between students is the top priority. From there, the classroom should be an engaging place where disagreement and evidence-informed discussions are encouraged. Media and AI literacy will be even more important as disinformation and artificial media become more pervasive than in previous electoral cycles. American politics academics must not only stand on the shoulders of the giants who have come before them, but also act as peacemakers for education and reconciliation in a time of democratic peril. ■