PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

Webinar Highlights from "Teaching the 2024 US Election"

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The 2024 presidential election is shaping up to be an historic event, with far-reaching implications for domestic and international politics. The contentious election cycle poses a challenge for political science educators, forcing us to consider how to best teach our students about the election in an increasingly polarized environment. On July 16, 2024, APSA hosted a webinar, titled "Teaching the 2024 US Election," featuring political science scholars and educators from across the country to address this very topic. Michelle Allendoerfer, the Senior Director of Teaching and Learning at APSA, moderated the panel, which included Allison Rank (SUNY Oswego), Athena M. King (Old Dominion University), and Juan Carlos Huerta (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi). During the webinar, the panelists discussed how political science educators—from a variety of subfields—could incorporate the 2024 election into their courses given the current political climate and the needs of students in a post-COVID world. Common themes, such as promoting active learning and channeling students' interests, emerged throughout the one-hour and fifteen-minute discussion.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE POLITICAL BACKDROP

The panelists argued that acknowledging the current political climate and how it may be affecting students is a key component to integrating the 2024 election cycle into the classroom. Rank noted that politics feels extremely unsettled for students at this moment since we are living through significant political realignments. She notes, however, that this unsettled feeling offers a perfect opportunity to discuss fundamental political science concepts, such as power and institutional change.

King, in agreement, stressed the importance of discussing Project 2025 with students, especially as some will feel angry, confused, and scared about the election. Our duty as educators, she believes, is to shepherd students through the semester and explain to them what is happening in the political sphere. King uses examples from recent elections to teach about the fragility of democracy and emphasize the difficulty in maintaining it.



Huerta also noted the importance of discussing the current political climate and noted that the electoral stakes are high for many students and Americans, in general. Pointing out the Dobbs decision, for example, the role that presidents play in appointing Supreme Court justices, and the impact that Supreme Court justices can have on reproductive rights, clarify the electoral stakes for both conservative and liberal students. He finds that the current cycle also provides the opportunity to discuss what it means to be a democracy beyond our laws and constitution and talk about democratic norms and values, and ultimately, deepening democracy.

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ENGAGE STUDENTS THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING

The panelists also suggested several activities for educators to incorporate into the classroom to encourage students to think critically about the election, and politics in general. Huerta, for example, explained that he often invites outside organizations, such as the League of Women Voters Corpus Christi, to teach students about voter registration and register them to vote. In doing so, his students learn how difficult it is to register to vote in Texas and discuss how to vote by mail, along with the constraints that come with it. Rank, who also serves as the director of the campus voter engagement initiative at SUNY Oswego, also dedicates in-class time to voter registration.

King incorporates media literacy assignments throughout her courses. As part of the activity, students must focus on one specific topic but read several news articles on the topic across the ideological spectrum. In doing so, her students learn about what gets emphasized and left out by reporters with different biases who cover the same topic. Not only does the activity engage students and teach them about elections and their own ideological leanings, but also helps King address concerns about mis- and disinformation.

Rank passes out index cards at the end of class that students must fill out with their "muddiest point," or a topic that they need more help working through. The muddiest points often range from anything about contemporary politics to other topics discussed in class. This allows Rank to dispel mis- and disinformation about the election by talking through what she reads in the index cards during her next class.

CHANNEL THEIR INTERESTS IN ELECTIONS AND POLITICS

The panelists also emphasized the importance of facilitating and channeling their students' interests in politics to teach about the election. King, for example, noted that she encourages honest, thoughtful discussion of politics during her class. Though she doesn't ask her students to disclose their policy preferences, she often finds that students are more than willing to discuss their views and interests with other students. When they invariably

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do disclose their preferences, she facilitates the conversation among the students without disclosing her views or influencing the discussion. Students often question and ask each other why they support certain views. When the discussion begins to get contentious, King usually poses a question or introduces a set of facts to get students to think critically about why they believe in what they believe. They walk away from the discussion with a better understanding of different perspectives. In contrast, Rank finds that students are just as interested in politics as previous cohorts but less willing to disclose their political preferences in class. Students often individually come to her office hours to talk about politics, and when they do, she takes the opportunity to channel their interest and connect them with organizations to achieve the kind of politics they hope to see in the world. Through their one-on-one discussions, Rank tries to move them from being perpetually online into spaces where they can be doing real work. By helping her students act, they perceive themselves as capable of contributing to bigger conversations and pursuing political change.

When asked about engaging and supporting undocumented students, the panelists agreed that acknowledging different immigration statuses among students offered the opportunity to discuss what it means to participate politically and be an active democratic citizen, which often goes beyond just voting.

DISCUSS THE US IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS

The panelists also believed that teaching the election was not just limited to courses on American politics but rather see the election as a tool to teach critical topics in other areas. Rank noted that educators outside of American politics have significant expertise and can provide commentary that would be useful for students, for example, on democratic backsliding.

King encourages faculty in other subfields to think about certain issues or concepts that are familiar to them, but that Americanists also address. Social contract theory, for instance, is one such topic that King spends a lot of time talking about. Situating the discussion of social contract theory in American politics helps students make connections across subfields. She also suggests speaking with Americanists to tease out similarities and concepts among subfields—even though educators might not be approaching them with similar tools, they may find parallels across topics.

Huerta agreed, explaining that comparative politics educators can compare the US to other democracies to shed light on pervasive problems with American democracy, such as low turnout, polarization, and inequality. In terms of political theory, he noted that educators could focus on the idea of what is just, what is good politics, and how American politics fits within these contexts. As political scientists, Huerta explains that we are all studying the same basic things, like the equitable distribution of power and how the government works, so we have different tools to approach questions from different areas. We all have the expertise to address the election within our subfields.

CONCLUSION

Though teaching the 2024 election may be challenging, the panelists ultimately agreed that incorporating it into the classroom is important for defending democracy and engaging students. Teaching the election provides the chance to promote civil discourse and discussion among students so they may better understand each other, which King notes as critical to their education since these students will be moving through our political system together over the course of their lives. Through discussing this contentious topic, Huerta finds that students can learn about democratic discourse in practice and become more tolerant of opposing perspectives. Rank finds that teaching the election is a chance to revitalize students' interest in politics and direct their energy and interest in productive, meaningful ways. By having these conversations, the panelists note that we can all start finding solutions to the issues we face and move forward. ■

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