

Christopher Baylor

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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My goals in teaching political science are to promote interest in politics and provide students with analytical tools to understand the political world. To that end, successful teaching begins with student motivation. My lifetime commitment to politics began with a geography teacher who engaged our class in discussion about the 1988 presidential election. In more than a decade of teaching, I have found that the best way to draw students into political science is to anchor class material to current events and elections, as my geography teacher did.

While promoting student motivation as an ongoing process, I teach students new concepts by building on more familiar concepts. Since students have different learning styles, it is also vital to use more than one method of instruction during a semester. Many students learn from comparison and contrast, and benefit from assigned debates. Others prefer less structured class discussion. Some prefer hands-on learning, so I have designed role-playing exercises, including mock elections in which some students are candidates and others represent interest groups.

Class participation is also essential to my teaching philosophy. It engages students and enables them to apply what they are learning to contemporary issues and cases. Promoting discussion begins by encouraging active reading, particularly of texts that expose students to multiple perspectives. Once this base is constructed, I facilitate discussion by inviting students to respond to each others' comments when possible, a practice I learned over time (when I first began teaching, my instinct was to respond to a student comment immediately). If students miss essential points or discuss them only briefly, however, I elaborate on them before moving to a new topic. For students with legitimate reasons for not participating verbally in class, I provide alternate means of participation evaluation.

To help students perform their best, I make sure to let them know how they will be evaluated and to evaluate them before major assignments are due. Class participation is one opportunity to provide feedback before formal grading, by encouraging students to think aloud in a non-threatening atmosphere. Also, commenting on written assignment summaries and rough drafts helps show students what I look for in written assignments. To accommodate multiple learning styles, I incorporate different types of evaluation in my courses for different student strengths.

In political science papers, a writing assignment's thesis, organization, and conclusion should be explored gradually as students learn more about a general topic. Some classes require a predetermined thesis, number of sources, and length, but I encourage and enforce exploration. Students should begin with a general topic, gather relevant arguments and compare them to their initial beliefs, and finally formulate a thesis that reflects what they have found. In my teaching, many of these steps would correspond

with an evaluation. The structure, sources, and other elements of the paper should be determined after this process, to fit the needs of a particular thesis. While students often begin research with a particular conclusion in mind, I encourage them to view writing as a tool for exploring different outcomes to their questions, whether normative or empirical. Writing facilitates an internal dialog in which students reexamine their prior beliefs in light of new arguments and new evidence.

Having studied political science at UCLA and Boston College, I am familiar with both rational choice theory and historical approaches to teaching political science. Both have a place in a balanced curriculum. Many students are curious about the debates political scientists have among themselves and only fully understand one approach when contrasted with another. Colleges increasingly require political science majors to complete a research project before graduating, and my strong background in both quantitative and qualitative methods will help me suggest research techniques tailored to student topics.

Although employers often require separate research philosophy and teaching philosophy statements, research and teaching have a symbiotic relationship. My own research has shown Wellesley and UCLA students what political scientists do apart from teaching. Research calls student attention to the creative, dynamic element of the discipline and reminds them that political science is not a static body of knowledge that remains constant from one textbook edition to the next.

My broad teaching experience, research background, and methodological training have equipped me to teach a variety of classes. I have taught students of many different backgrounds at high schools, colleges, and universities. In sum, I am committed to advancing active learning in political science regardless of student level or background. When college courses are taught correctly, students will broaden their horizons with new perspectives in political science and new analytical tools to apply to current and past events.