Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Stephanie Ramsey Davis

Political science is not a body of facts about government. It is a set of methods for finding out how politics works. Many of my students arrive wanting to learn how political institutions operate, and my goal is to make them curious about the how and the why of government. In a time when secondhand information about politics is plentiful and rarely checked, it is increasingly important that I train students to examine political information systematically. Almost none of my students will become political scientists. All of them will spend their lives encountering claims about politics, and I want them to leave my courses ready to ask why something happened, how we know it is true, and what would change the answer.

To that end, I have three goals that direct how I approach each class.

Teaching Goals

1. *Every student should have the opportunity to reach rigorous material regardless of their prior level of knowledge or preparation.* Incoming undergraduates do not begin from a common academic baseline.[1] To get students to the level of skill and knowledge I expect, I must assess where students are and then build from there.
2. *Students should be trained to explain political outcomes through institutions, incentives, and tradeoffs rather than through the virtues or failings of individuals.* Whether my students go into public administration, run for office, or simply vote, it serves them better to understand why institutions produce the outcomes they do than to know who to blame.
3. *Students should understand how political knowledge is made so that they can judge it.* How we get to an answer is as important as the answer itself. This is critical thought, and the clearest way to teach it is to take students along with us as we conduct our research in the discipline.

The first goal is about access to learning; the other two are about the level of learning I hope students attain. For the past decade I have taught toward them, mostly as instructor of record, in courses with as many as three hundred students and as few as eight, at R1 and R2 institutions. Each room demanded something different, but these experiences have convinced me that rigor and access are not in tension.

Active Learning

The goals above direct my teaching. Active learning is how I pursue them.

Research across disciplines consistently finds that people learn by doing, which in political science means students must take part in asking questions and finding evidence for them. Ours ought to be the easiest field in which to teach this way, since our subject is argued over in public every day. Yet the usual mode of instruction is lecture with occasional discussion, and our own journals report that active learning is uncommon in the introductory courses where most students first meet the field[2]. Not every

---

[1] ACT, *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2024*: 30% of 2024 high school graduates met three or four of ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks and 57% met at least one, leaving 43% who met none.

[2] Archer and Miller, "Prioritizing Active Learning: An Exploration of Gateway Courses in Political Science," *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2011).

concept can be taught by doing, but being deliberate about the ones that can produces learning that lasts.

I organize my courses around three strategies, each answering one of the goals above: **adaptive**, **experiential**, and **investigative**. The activities named below are described in full in the appendix.

Adaptive: teaching the students in front of me

The first two weeks of every course are diagnostic — ungraded quizzes, in-class polls, and open discussion. I find the average level of preparation, then I look at the variance, because the spread matters far more than the mean for how I adapt. The average student does not exist, and teaching to that student loses everyone else. What the variance consists of changes with the course. In an introductory class, some students arrive knowing a fair amount about government and some almost none, while separately some can work through a dense reading and some cannot. In quantitative methods, some can produce a logit model, others can read a regression table but not build one, and others are still working with the mean and median. I adjust the plan accordingly, adding a session on foundations or moving sooner to harder material, and I draw on a library of short primer videos I record myself for concepts that reliably stall. I do not restructure a course around its least prepared student.

Adaptive teaching also requires that students feel comfortable showing me what they do not know, and they will only do that if being wrong is cheap. So I keep the stakes low. Nothing is worth more than thirty percent of a final grade, and weekly reading quizzes stay open for a week with two attempts and immediate feedback, so that being wrong on Tuesday and right on Thursday is the ordinary way through the material rather than a failure. I use several kinds of assessment, because I do not trust a single measure of a student any more than I trust a single variable to explain a political phenomenon in my own research. Across one hundred forty evaluations at UA Little Rock, ninety percent of students agreed that course objectives and expectations were clearly stated and explained, and eighty-four percent that they learned a great deal.

Experiential: bad outcomes come from structure, not from villains

Students arrive believing that bad political outcomes come from bad or foolish people, or from the other party — which is what social media and partisan pundits tell them. Political scientists know better. As Kenneth Shepsle put it, Congress is a "they," not an "it," and the same is true of nearly every political institution. Outcomes come from structure and incentives, and every proposed fix creates its own losers. Teaching that means putting students inside the constraint rather than describing it to them.

My **legislative simulation** makes students live inside the institution. Each is assigned a state, district, and party in a scaled-down Congress with deliberately slim majorities, and each begins with a reelection probability score built from their district's real electoral history. Acting against constituent interests carries a penalty, so students cannot simply vote their own preferences. Unlike most legislative simulations, mine does not center floor debate; as a congressional scholar I know that referral, jurisdiction, and the Rules Committee have usually settled the outcome before anyone speaks.

Counterfactual Policy Analysis works in the opposite direction. Students name an outcome they dislike, propose a fix, and follow the fix wherever it goes. They arrive with a grievance and leave having worked out for themselves that their reform has a history and that no policy is free of consequences or tradeoffs. In research methods the same activity teaches them to turn a political

judgment into a testable claim, and they see how quickly an intuitive solution becomes a research design problem.

Investigative: how political knowledge is created

Research participation belongs in the curriculum rather than beside it. The usual arrangement hands students knowledge after it has already been produced, which tacitly teaches them that research is something other people do elsewhere. That wastes the one thing a research university can uniquely offer undergraduates: the chance to approach a question systematically and with rigor, and to bring that rigor to decisions they will actually make. Textbooks give findings without showing how scholars arrived at them, and students who only ever receive conclusions never learn to evaluate one. The only way to teach students how to do research is to do research with them.

I do that in two ways. Inside my courses, an assignment I call *Explain It Like I'm 5* has students take a peer-reviewed article apart and rebuild it in language a non-specialist can follow. Outside them, I keep undergraduates on my research team year-round, and not as a reward reserved for the strongest students in the program. When a student shows interest, I bring them in. Over the past two years that has meant students working on archival collection of congressional communications, a doctrinal study of case law on race and abortion in Mississippi before and after *Dobbs*, interviews with communication directors for sitting House members, and research on gut-and-go bills in state legislatures. None of them arrived knowing how to do research, and that is precisely the reason to bring them.

At most universities this work is reserved for graduate students, or for undergraduates who have already settled on a research career. I think that is backwards, and it is also a question of access. Students at well-resourced universities are far more likely to be brought into faculty research than students at regional publics, who are more likely to be working, commuting, or the first in their families to attend college. They are not less capable of the work. They are less likely to be asked. I ask them, and asking pays off. Braden Carr won a university Signature Grant, presented a poster at the Midwest Political Science Association, and went on to lead a team of four undergraduates in Washington.[3]

What Scales, and What Comes Next

The standard objection is that active learning does not scale. That is the wrong conclusion drawn from a real constraint. Some things do need a small room — oral exams and roundtables among them — but most do not. Polling, low-stakes quizzes, group work on conflicting findings, and the ELI5 write-up all work in a lecture hall, and structured group assignments are easier to respond to at three hundred than three hundred individual papers. What changes is not whether students do the work but how I collect it and answer it.

I am prepared to teach the American politics core — introductory American government, Congress and the presidency, political parties, state and local government, judicial processes, constitutional law, and gender and politics — along with undergraduate and graduate research methods. I would also like to build a research seminar around the congressional communications archive my students and I are assembling, in which undergraduates work directly with the data, develop a question, and produce original analysis.

[3] In March 2026 I was invited to the Martin School at the University of Kentucky to make this argument at length, in a talk titled "Question Everything. Then Systematically Test It: Why Undergraduate Research is Worth It."

Political science is a way of finding things out. I want my students to leave able to look at a claim about politics and ask what stands behind it. The students who came to Washington with me learned that in the sharpest form available to them. It is the same thing I am after in a lecture hall of three hundred.

Appendix: Active Learning Activities

Legislative Simulation — *Legislative Processes*

The simulation places every student into a single Congress, each assigned a state, district, and party. The size of the Senate and House scales with the size of the class, and each chamber's majority is deliberately slim so that party discipline matters and cross-party negotiation is required of the minority. One semester I ran the simulation across my face-to-face and online sections at once; both sections operated as one legislative body in two distinct chambers. Legislating is a group project, so students discover the coordination problem by experiencing it. They elect their own leadership, who assign committees and appoint chairs. Bills move through referral, hearings, markup, the Rules Committee, floor action, and conference. More importantly, students learn that the real strategizing happens off the chamber floor. Most legislative simulations focus on floor debate. Mine does not, because floor debate is the stage of the legislative process that matters least — referral, jurisdiction, and the Rules Committee have usually settled the outcome before anyone speaks.

The simulation also builds in the dual nature of Congress: members legislate and they represent. Each student begins with a reelection probability score built from their district's actual margin of victory and its average partisan vote share across the last two House, Senate, and presidential elections. Moves are scored against findings from legislative studies research, and acting against constituent interests carries a penalty multiplier. Students cannot simply vote their own preferences, because the district's numbers are on the table and the scoring punishes ignoring them. My favorite mechanism is one of the smallest. Each legislator may request constituent polling twice in the entire simulation and must write the question they wish to ask; I supply the results. Students learn quickly that information is scarce, costly, and shaped by how you ask for it.

Counterfactual Policy Analysis — *introductory courses and research methods*

Students name a political outcome they dislike, propose a fix, and then follow the fix wherever it goes. Lately students tend to raise judicial selection. They usually begin by suggesting that a particular federal or state judge is unqualified, and I ask them to keep going. What qualifications should matter for a judge? An age floor, a degree, a civics test? If there must be a test, who writes it? With those constraints on holding office, who gets excluded? Has anyone used qualification requirements to keep qualified people off a ballot before? Students arrive with a grievance and leave having worked out for themselves that their reform has a history and that no policy is free of consequences or tradeoffs.

In my research methods course the same activity does double duty by teaching students to turn a political judgment into a testable claim. If students believe some judges are unqualified, they must first define what "qualified" means and decide how to measure it. Then they determine what outcome a proposed requirement should produce, identify the evidence needed to evaluate that prediction, and compare it with what would likely happen without the requirement. It is striking how well students confront alternative explanations, imperfect measures, and possible selection effects once the question is theirs. They see how quickly an intuitive policy solution becomes a research design problem.

Explain It Like I'm 5 (ELI5) — *upper-level courses*

Named for the Reddit forum. First we practice taking a journal article apart in class: finding the research question, identifying the gap in knowledge the research intends to fill, and discussing variable choice and hypotheses. Students locate the conclusion and are asked what questions the article did not

answer. Then I provide a list of accessible peer-reviewed articles, and each student chooses one, reads it, breaks down its main parts, and explains it to the class in language a non-specialist can follow. The audience's questions during the presentation show the presenter exactly where the explanation failed and where it worked. The student then has two days to produce a written version that incorporates what they learned from those questions.

In the spirit of adaptive teaching, I grade the presentation and the write-up separately and weight the final score toward whichever the student did better. Some students think out loud well and write poorly; some are the reverse. I want to know what they understand, not which format suits them.

Congressional Communications Archival Project — *undergraduate research*

In spring 2026 I began an archival dataset project with Braden Carr, an undergraduate who had approached me about research two years earlier. Braden and I traveled to Washington, DC to collect advisory opinions at the Legislative Resource Center in the Cannon House Office Building. Advisory opinions are the forms members file before spending franked money, with the newsletter, email, flyer, or text script attached. Records before 2018 exist only on paper, which means these public records are not functionally public.

The work is exactly as tedious as it sounds. You request one member for one year, an archivist retrieves the folder, one person unstaples while the other photocopies, you keep strict order, restaple, and return the folder exactly as you found it, then box the copies to fly home and digitize. Braden and I photocopied more than ten thousand documents that week. In April 2026 I secured funding to return, and Braden led a team of four undergraduates continuing the collection. The result will be one of the most comprehensive digital records of congressional constituent communication available to researchers.

Students can practice the steps of research in a classroom assignment, but the work begins to resonate when the process is real. Research is also messy, and it is worth something for students to watch a professor hit a problem she did not anticipate and work it out in front of them.