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DISCUSSION

Why I'm Doubling Down on Deliberative Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

In a political environment characterized by partisan polarization, heightened incivility, escalating political violence, and democratic backsliding, teacher-scholars in political science increasingly embrace civic engagement pedagogy and concern for their students' democratic capacity as a professional obligation. Civic engagement pedagogy has expanded far beyond its original focus on service learning to encompass a wider array of high impact practices and experiential learning. This essay argues that the most relevant of these approaches in the current political environment is deliberative pedagogy, as it has the greatest potential to scaffold essential civic skills, build trust, bolster civic identity, and broaden political engagement. These outcomes are most apt to occur with careful design to ensure deliberative pedagogy benefits all students rather than merely those who already feel comfortable participating in politics.

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Embracing civic engagement pedagogy

Teaching political science during an era of partisan polarization where rude politics have given way to increased episodes of threats and violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022) has increased my commitment to civic engagement pedagogy – and in particular to the subset of civic engagement pedagogy labeled deliberative pedagogy (Shaffer et al. 2017; Thomas 2007, 2011).

For some time, I have argued that political science should be at the forefront of the civic engagement movement, a reform effort focused on reprioritizing higher education's civic mission, by embracing relevant pedagogy (Poloni-Staudinger and Strachan 2020). This approach, with a similar emphasis on civic learning recommended by APSA's recent presidential taskforce report *Rethinking Political Science Education*, extends learning objectives in political science classes beyond teaching students to understand our discipline's scholarship and to apply the skills required to replicate social science research (APSA Presidential Taskforce 2024). As the report (p. 12) notes, "…we must also promote democratic values among our students along with the tools of civic engagement." Specifically, this approach highlights the role of teacher-scholars who believe that goals for student learning should include efforts to cultivate the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to sustain public-spirited participation in democratic forms of government (McCartney, Bennion,

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and Simpson 2013). In short, this perspective encourages political scientists to take responsibility for bolstering our students' democratic capacity along with their academic ability.

Moving beyond civic engagement as service learning

Initially, reformers associated with the civic engagement movement focused on identifying universal best practices – the pedagogy, lessons, assignments, and co-curricular activities – that if implemented uniformly across college and university campuses would transform students into capable, motivated, public-spirited citizens. Early versions of civic engagement pedagogy, for example, focused heavily on service learning and community engagement, but evolved to include a broader array of learning experiences (For examples of this breadth, see Bell, Ong-Whaley, and Rank 2024; Goldberg and Ong-Whaley 2024; Magjuka 2023; Matto et al 2017; Matto et al. 2021; and McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013). This expansion occurred as service learning yielded increased commitment to voluntarism as a way to address public issues, with little increased commitment to political participation (Zukin et al 2006). Still focused on experiential learning, pedagogy in this tradition is now designed to hold students accountable for performing civic skills and applying substantive civic knowledge in relevant settings outside the classroom or in classroom simulations. These high-impact practices cultivate students' self-efficacy, the sense that they can apply their skills and knowledge in meaningful, effective ways beyond the context of a particular classroom – thus promoting deep learning and mastery. Perhaps more importantly, these learning experiences are also intended to cultivate students' intrinsic identity, otherwise labeled civic virtue or self-interest rightly understood, associated with public-spirited citizens who will continue to assume responsibility for their civic obligations long after their formal education ends (Strachan 2015).

Matching civic engagement pedagogy to student needs

Beyond embracing a wider array of teaching practices, encompassing everything from internships and voter registration and mobilization drives to classroom simulations and formal debates, advocates of this approach have also recently argued that civic engagement pedagogy must be tailored to students' experiences and needs. Our discipline's political behavior research regularly establishes a correlation between a wide array of demographic identities and the way people respond to political stimuli. Similarly, we should anticipate that students' intersectional identities and lived experiences will affect the way they respond to learning experiences inside and outside the classroom. This concern with lived experiences includes, but also extends beyond, those linked to demographic identities. Colleges and universities do not exist in a vacuum but are situated within a broader political environment, which will also inevitably affect the way students react to classroom and co-curricular learning. Hence teacher-scholars attempting to cultivate our students' democratic capacity must ensure their efforts are timely and take the cumulative effect of political experiences outside our classrooms into account (Poloni-Staudinger and Strachan 2020; Strachan 2025).

Current needs call for deliberative pedagogy

While teacher-scholars can adopt an array of effective teaching practices that help students navigate the current political environment, the current moment, both in the United States and across the globe, cries out for an embrace of deliberative pedagogy. Deliberative pedagogy is a subset of civic engagement pedagogy that promotes civic learning by including students in deliberative forums – within classrooms, on campus, or with the community. The approach is built on the foundational work of deliberative democracy theorists, who underscore the role public deliberation must play in authentic, democratic governance. This work grounds democratic legitimacy not solely on statecraft and elections, but on the type of interactions that should take place among citizens and public officials in order to facilitate reasoned decision-making and informed judgment.

These theorists claim that participation in deliberation broadens citizens' perspectives, encouraging them to move past narrow self-interests as they become familiar with others' needs and concerns. Rather than a more traditional definition of politics as a zero-sum game that determines who obtains government resources, deliberation is associated with facilitating collective problem solving. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, several theorists developed comprehensive theories of deliberative democracy in an attempt to identify essential elements of authentic deliberation that could be used to evaluate the quality of democratic regimes (Bohman 2003, Dryzek 2000, Guttman and Thompson 1996, 2004; Habermas 1991). These criteria vary from scholar to scholar, but most agree that deliberation requires public issues of concern to be addressed voluntarily, through an open exchange of ideas characterized by reason giving, willingness to consider others' perspectives, inclusive participation, and equal treatment among participants. Given erosion of opportunities for deliberation in the public sphere, along with the difficulty of meeting these ideals in real-world settings, deliberative pedagogy builds on this theoretical work by turning to formal instruction rather than natural political socialization to prepare students for participation in democracy's underpinning deliberative processes (Shaffer et al. 2017; Thomas 2007, 2011).

Note, deliberation is distinct from both debate and dialogue. Debate focuses on well-informed adversaries who critique one another's positions in a public format to identify the strengths and weaknesses of different policy positions – and is an approach best suited to students who already share a public-spirited identity and an interest in public policy as a solution to wicked problems. Meanwhile, dialogue focuses on sharing different experiences and perspectives through guided, civil interactions to build trust and empathy across differences – and is best suited to helping students develop tolerance amidst intense partisan polarization. Dialogue alone does not help students to hone civic skills or cultivate civic identities. Indeed, heightening tolerance without a sense of civic obligation may result in decreased levels of civic and political engagement (Mutz 2006). Hence it is important to keep in mind that debate and dialogue are similar to but distinct from deliberation as neither focuses on seeking enough common ground, either in the form of shared pain sacrifices or a previously undiscovered third way, to identify feasible policy solutions for pressing public issues.

Deliberative pedagogy scaffolds a wide array of transferable civic skills

While an array of experiential learning experiences, including dialogue and debate, can promote civic knowledge and skills essential to good citizenship, doubling down on deliberative pedagogy in the current political environment makes sense for a number of reasons. First, the erosion of civic infrastructure, the rise of standardized testing, and the lingering effects of pandemic lockdowns on current college students means that many had limited access to robust political socialization, either in natural settings or throughout their primary and secondary educations. Participating in deliberative forums bolsters students' civic knowledge not only about specific public issues to be discussed, but about the role of political actors and institutions required to implement the preferences that emerge from them. Deliberative discussion sessions embedded in introductory level courses provides a particularly apt opportunity to backfill students' lost civic learning by scaffolding a wide array of essential civic skills – including, for example, identifying public issues of concern, discerning among sources of political information, applying critical thinking skills, engaging in active listening and reason-giving, using political civility to manage disagreements, and cultivating empathy and tolerance – that can be reinforced later in the curriculum.

This array of civic skills is transferrable across many civic and political settings. For example, deliberative decision-making is important in formal policymaking bodies, ranging from school boards and town councils to state legislatures and Congress. Yet deliberation is also important during times of democratic backsliding, as it helps members of voluntary associations engage in enclave deliberation to identify and implement the most effective strategies for mutual aid and disruptive politics (Abdullah, Karpowitz, and Raphael 2016; Chenowith 2021; Karpowitz, Raphhael, and Hammond 2009).

Finally, research indicates that experiential learning through high-impact practices such as deliberation benefit the least academically prepared and civically engaged students the most (Beaumont et al. 2013; Kuh and Schneider 2008). Hence embedding deliberative pedagogy into our classrooms should not exacerbate academic and democratic "achievement gaps," but should provide first generation, minoritized, and disenfranchized students with the skills and resources they need to participate more effectively in public affairs, contributing to a more inclusive, representative democracy over time.

Deliberation has the potential to rebuild trust

Beyond lost socialization, the corrosive effect of the current political environment highlights my second reason for prioritizing deliberative pedagogy. Our current students have limited exposure to examples of politicians engaged in civil, bipartisan deliberation – both because this behavior is less common than in previous eras, but also because traditional and social media prioritize content featuring politicians who embrace conflict and who violate traditional norms of comity and civility (Mutz 2015). Exposure to rude politics erodes our students' trust in elected officials' ability to resolve the public issues that they care about (Lawless and Fox 2017; Mutz 2006; Shames 2017). But as Strachan et al (2024) discovered in an experimental design implemented on 18

college campuses, viewing even a quick 6-minute montage of video clips featuring politicians engaged in civil political discourse and deliberation can improve students' trust not only in the specific politicians portrayed in the clips, but in elected officials in general. Given that examples of this type of interaction are few and far between in the political news that our students consume, successful civil deliberation with their peers or with community members can provide persuasive first-hand experiences that a pragmatic approach to problem-solving is still possible, despite the polarizing intensity of issues facing our political communities.

Deliberation has the potential to broaden political engagement and cultivate civic identity

Even more troubling, and providing a third reason to embrace deliberation, the extended era of rude politics erodes enthusiasm for serving as elected and appointed public officials, especially among young people who have known nothing other than rude politics. Studies show that high school students, college students, and even graduate students in relevant fields report that rude politics diminishes their interest in public service (Lawless and Fox 2017; Shames 2017). The experimental design described above yielded further troubling insight into this effect. Students with low interest in wielding power, who were more apt to be women, were most alienated from public service after exposure to politicians behaving rudely. Meanwhile those with high interest in wielding power, who were more apt to be men, reported far more comfort working with and imitating rude politicians. Hence without intervention, the current era of rude and violent politics has the potential to amplify the aggressive, masculine ethos currently associated with politics, while exacerbating longstanding gender gaps in political engagement and ambition (Strachan et al 2024).

Disrupting this pattern will require not only persuasively demonstrating that political processes can be characterized by civil deliberation to address public issues of concern but also fortifying a sense of civic duty among those who are not otherwise intrinsically motivated to seek political authority. As previously noted, deliberative pedagogy clearly accomplishes the first of these goals. It is also the civic education intervention most likely to advance the second when carefully structured simulations of deliberation in the classroom cultivates peer norms. This outcome occurs as students hold one another accountable for being politically informed and for being the type of person who helps to develop solutions to public problems, and these democratic norms continue to inform students' intrinsic identity and influence their behavior well into adulthood (Campbell 2006, 2007). Hence deliberative pedagogy should help expand not only the electorate, but the pool of candidates for public office, beyond those who are most polarized and those most willing to imitate rude politics in order to gain access to political power.

For all of these reasons my colleagues and I at the University of Akron have embedded deliberation into our curriculum in a variety of ways. We have embedded deliberative discussions sessions, guided by trained teaching assistant facilitators, into introductory American Government classes, where we hope to scaffold the civic skill building and identity formation described above. To provide further training, students enrolled in both our new BS in Applied Politics and Civic Leadership

major and in our longstanding Master of Applied Politics degree are now required to take a class entitled Deliberation and Political Disagreement to build on this foundation. Our long-term goal is to have a reservoir of trained students who can help to facilitate deliberative forums on campus and in the broader community.

Responding to critics to ensure deliberative pedagogy is inclusive

Yet because we want these experiences to be effective for all of our students, we take critiques of deliberative democracy seriously when designing curriculum and programs. Critics have long pointed out that the ideals of inclusivity, reason-giving, and equal treatment prioritized by deliberative democracy theorists cannot be fully realized in real-world settings (Benhabib 1996; Sanders 1997; Young 2000). Ample evidence demonstrates that minorities, women, and the poor often struggle to be heard in deliberative settings, as their communication style may not be perceived as reason-based, and their contributions may not be given equal consideration by others (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Elder Elizabeth, Karpowitz, Mendelberg 2025). Especially in formal civic education in an academic setting, however, awareness of these concerns and attention to detail can improve deliberative experiences for all students. Some suggested modifications include the following steps.

Prior to launching deliberation with students, develop a rubric or ground rules that prioritize active listening, civility, and inclusion. Be sure to explain why these norms and practices are essential for sustaining democracy in addition to maintaining classroom decorum. Use the rubric to evaluate students' ability to engage in high-quality deliberative interactions and be sure to provide timely feedback when they violate these expectations. Rubrics can also be used to interrupt and correct students who need a gentle reminder in the midst of their deliberative forum.

Part of preparing students to engage in deliberation should include reassuring them that narrative storytelling, lived experiences, and emotional reactions are often incorporated into evidence that can be used to inform decision-making. Such instruction helps students to identify a wider array of acceptable sources of information and communication styles that can be used to identify feasible solutions to their issues of concern. In addition, encourage them to think of deliberation as the search for viable solutions to public problems rather than a zero-sum sum game with winners and losers.

Consider relying on turn-taking, modified parliamentary procedure, or round-robin during deliberation to ensure that women and minorities do not need to interrupt or to talk over others to gain the floor. Further, relying on a super-majority vote to approve resolutions can help to ensure that minority voices and perspectives must be taken into consideration.

Discourage using a preliminary vote to assess preferences prior to deliberation, as this practice can shut down those with alternative preferences and lead to a false consensus that mirrors the initial majority opinion.

Consider linking deliberation to a tangible outcome, such as a graded assignment, to enhance willingness to participate in a deliberative process. Failure to do so will result in introverted or conflict-adverse students ceding all of the time to extroverted and/or argumentative peers. (Finally, for more insight into how applied deliberation pracitioners have pragmatically and effectively responded to critics over the years, see Curato et al 2017).

Conclusion

All of these efforts correspond to the belief that, especially in the current political environment, teacher-scholars dedicated to fulfilling higher education's civic mission should implement a timely pedagogy that not only teaches relevant civic skills but fortifies civic identity. Well-designed deliberative pedagogy is particularly suited to the task of persuading a broader swathe of the student body that their peers expect them to participate actively in public life, despite the current discomfort of doing so. In short, we are doubling down on deliberative pedagogy at the University of Akron, with the hope that many of our students, and not merely those who are willing to emulate rude politics because they want to wield power, will be persuaded to become well-informed, active citizens and to pursue careers in public service.

Notes on contributor

J. Cherie Strachan is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron. Recent research interests include women's political ambition, and the effects of rudeness on youth political participation. Her civic engagement work explores campus and community deliberation, as well as political socialization within campus student organizations. Strachan coauthored the textbook *Why Don't Women Rule the World?,* co-edited the *Palgrave Handbook of Fashion and Politics*, and co-edited *Strategies for Navigating Graduate School and Beyond*. She serves on APSA Council and is Vice Chair of APSA's Political Science Education Section.

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