Thomas J. Leeper

Teaching Statement

Political psychologists study people. We want to know how people think, act, and understand the social and political universe. It is this curiosity about human understanding of politics that fundamentally drives my experience as an educator. Just as great teachers cultivated my interests in politics, I see it as my responsibility to mentor others in developing an understanding for themselves of political questions and the happenings of politics. My research typically explores how people think and feel about politics and often grapples with meta-scientific questions about how researchers might come to know individuals' political cognitions, the causes of those beliefs and attitudes, and the implications thereof for politics more broadly. Teaching is a natural transition from this exploration of human psychology and behavior in which the objective is not for me to transmit information and formulate students' understanding but to guide them as they seek answers to their own political questions.

In teaching political science, it is my objective to leave students not only with a richer understanding of politics but also with conceptual and analytic tools they can apply to critically receive information about the broader social world. I believe it is vital to offer students something more than mere exposure to academic Political Science; what they are taught and what they learn from my courses must be applicable in their future lives regardless of their chosen careers. Toward this end, I see the encouragement of individual choice in topical exploration, the cultivation of useful methodological, analytic, and communication skillsets, and persistent return to everyday social and political examples as vital elements of undergraduate education. In this way, teaching political science must serve to both train students in the use of a diverse set of tools for understanding the world – quantitative methods, qualitative data collection, formal theory, normative and textual critique, etc. – and expose students to the simple facts – facts clarified by consideration of real political happenings – that politics is complicated, little there is clear cut, and power operates in every facet of the social world.

Most important of all, however, I see the integration of pedagogy and research as a core means of actively engaging students in the analytic thinking and professional development that are critical to their future success. I hope to share my research with future students and involve them in my own discovery of new knowledge, like the faculty that inspired me during my undergraduate and graduate experiences, as well as mentor and guide future students' own explorations into the political and social questions that motivate and excite them. This reciprocal transmission of assistance seems to me an underappreciated opportunity to provide students with opportunities for professional development as well as fully embed advanced students in research activities, professional networking, and technical skill development that will differentiate them in later employment.

Formulating interesting, applied research questions, translating those questions into constructs, operational definitions, and analysis (be it qualitative or quantitative), and communicating findings aurally, visually, and in written form for diverse audiences are precisely the skills that differentiate well-qualified college graduates. To the extent that students additionally obtain nuanced understandings of complex political, social, and psychological phenomena as a result, research experience is doubly beneficial. Politics is, therefore, a means to motivate thinking and a context in which students can develop competence in these skill areas. I see my role in these aspects of learning as simultaneously a benevolent critic with high expectations and as a resource with expertise on the political and methodological matters that students and I

can explore together. Critical to my teaching style is a persistent availability, both in-person and online, so that students can readily pose and receive answers to questions as well as discuss and elaborate their ideas about course materials.

The route I see to great teaching is the same political curiosity that drives my own research matched with both a recognition that many students have little prior knowledge of politics or empirical research and a passionate concern that students enter their postgraduate careers with a richer, more nuanced understanding of their social and political world along with the analytic tools necessary to perpetuate lifelong learning. In research methods courses from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, I have taught students – through a heavy emphasis on interactive sections, use of office hours, and extensive written feedback – to never be satisfied with simple answers to simple questions. My goal in previous courses – as it will be in future courses – is to push students to generate provocative research topics and then drive them to look beyond "mono-causal" answers to those questions. Acknowledging, tolerating, and making sense of the complexity of political phenomena is a critical, over-arching goal of my pedagogy. By emphasizing written feedback to written work, I believe students simultaneously learn to wrestle with the substance of complex ideas and the often more difficult task of translating those complexities into concise, comprehensible expressions of ideas.

While my prior teaching experience has largely been in assisting undergraduate methods courses, I have prepared syllabi on both substantive and methodological courses, most of which emphasize independent research, critical thinking, and long-term writing projects. Specifically, I am prepared to teach introductory courses on American government and politics, mid-level courses on various topics in political behavior (e.g., public opinion, political communication, campaigns and elections, political psychology) that could easily be translated into advanced level seminars, as well as a variety of research methods courses. With regard to specific methods instruction, I am happy to teach courses on quantitative and qualitative research (including statistical methods), survey design and analysis, and experimental and quasi-experimental methods.

These courses could fit within existing requirements (e.g., a methods sequence), but I am also eager to design more extensive curricula in political analysis that reflect the current trend toward identification-oriented social science, with courses specifically centered around quantitative, qualitative, and philosophical issues of causation. Courses in this vein would emphasize when and how to make causal attributions (and to critically read causal claims made by others) rather than focus on statistical techniques for answering descriptive questions, which in my experience confuse or at least disenchant many students, leave them with little knowledge of or concern for the challenges of causal inference, and discourage them from pursuing further training. Helping students to develop tools for making and critiquing causal claims is critical to their training given the prevalence of causal attributions in political and social reality. The utility of both general tools and substantive knowledge of causation in politics and policymaking are similarly valuable for their subsequent careers and roles as democratic citizens.