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Educating a New Electorate

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The U.S. presidential election is still half a year away, but it’s been on the minds of DePaul students and faculty since at least the fall quarter. Students have also been discussing state and local politics, spin and social media, pundits, debates and much more. While it may be politics as usual across the country, it’s still great fodder for engaging and educating the new electorate.

By Kelsey Schagemann

LEARNING THE BASICS
Students type furiously on their laptops or fanatically scrawl on notebook paper as they strive to keep up with Catherine May’s (LAS ’83) energetic lecture midway through her course on the American political system. May, a senior instructor in political science and the major’s internship coordinator, is a whirlwind in the classroom, shouting “Bingo!” and “Ding, ding, ding!” when students answer a question to her satisfaction. “After this course, hopefully all of you will be more attentive to and interested in politics,” May announces. In a quieter voice, she adds, “We shall see.”

May’s infectious enthusiasm had already won over freshman Emily Melbye, who entered DePaul with an interest in politics but little prior involvement. “This class has definitely made me want to be active right now versus later in life,” she says. She credits this development in part to her dawning understanding of the political system’s myriad complexities. “I’ve realized the government is less transparent than I previously thought,” she explains. “The course has made me re-examine my beliefs and assumptions.”

Coming to terms with the good, the bad and the ugly of politics affects students in different ways. Where Melbye found inspiration, fellow freshman Jake Villont, who once harbored dreams of becoming a politician, felt despair. “I started to have a defeatist mindset,” he admits. “After all, I’m only one voice.” Villont could have accepted his powerlessness and given up on politics entirely, but instead, he asked his instructor how he could remain positive. May notes that she has struggled with this concept ever since she started teaching two decades ago. “I have to walk a fine line between explaining how the system is supposed to operate and how it actually does,” she says. “Unfortunately, that can contribute to a student’s sense of futility.”

When Villont raised his concerns, May responded as she always does: “To change the system, you have to know what’s wrong with it.” She went on to discuss the seemingly small actions students can take to make a big difference, pointing to the ways protesters used social media to organize and spread their revolutionary mes-
TAKING ACTION
One of May’s former students took a different approach. Sophomore Colin Mackintosh, a real estate major, created the Student Debt Reform Super Political Action Committee (StudentDebtReform.com) last year. “I didn’t know how to form a PAC before this class, but it’s actually not that difficult,” he says.

Mackintosh chose to focus on student debt because of his mother’s experiences. Although she grew up in poverty, she put herself through college thanks to scholarships and part-time jobs. “My mom was able to graduate from college, obtain her master’s degree and start her career without any student debt,” Mackintosh recalls. “Fast-forward to today, and that path is nearly impossible.”

Through his PAC, Mackintosh plans to run advertising campaigns in support of candidates who promote student debt reform policies, such as federal student loan refinancing. “I’ve learned a lot through this process,” Mackintosh says, citing not only a better grasp of the political system in general but also the logistics involved in starting a political organization, such as payment processing, website design, reporting, communication and the nuances of fundraising. “It’s been a great educational experience for him,” May says. “He’s already successful in my opinion, no matter what comes of this politically.”

MEETING THE EXPERTS
Guest speakers, such as students like Mackintosh, elected officials or industry experts, make politics come to life. Part-time Instructor Zachary Cook uses such speakers regularly in his courses, and he also takes students on field trips to city hall and other relevant locations. “When we’re meeting with elected officials, I encourage students to be respectful, but also not to shy away from asking tough questions,” Cook says. “I want students to leave my classes thinking, ‘Okay, even if I don’t make this my profession, I do need to pay attention to politics. It actually does affect me.’”

In some cases, students take it even further. Lauren Cvengros (LAS ‘13) enrolled in Cook’s Parties and Elections course on a whim as a junior. “I was curious and hoped to become a more informed voter,” she remembers. “By the end of the course, I had declared my major in political science.” Cvengros, now a finance consultant with a consulting firm specializing in political campaigns and nonprofits, calls Cook’s classes “the stepping stones to my career path.”

“‘To change the system, you have to know what’s wrong with it.’

-Catherine May

That path started with a guest speaker. Cvengros was so intrigued by a presentation from Chicago Alderman Brendan Reilly’s director of constituent services that she parlayed her interest into an internship in the alderman’s office. Cook asserts that this type of relationship building occurs often in his courses: “Students realize that it’s possible to get involved; you just have to volunteer yourself and work hard.”

MAKING IT RELEVANT
Whether teaching an upper-level major requirement or an Explore Chicago course for first-year students, Cook ensures that his students are part of the curriculum design process. “I always poll my students at the beginning of the quarter to get a sense of the topics they’re interested in,” Cook says. “Not every class is the same, and you really do hear different feedback depending on what’s in vogue.”

Unsurprisingly, students in his fall quarter course on American politics wanted to learn more about the 2016 presidential election, but they also asked Cook to cover immigration and the minimum wage. “In the long run, if students aren’t interested in the topics, if they don’t feel like you’re meeting them where they ‘live,’ it’s more difficult to engage them,” Cook says.

His colleague Wayne Steger, professor of political science, always finds a way to incorporate current elections into his courses, especially high-profile mayoral, gubernatorial and national ones. “If it’s not high profile, students aren’t familiar with the details, which risks making the example meaningless,” Steger says.

At the same time, Steger pushes his students to examine critically the details they’ve heard. “I want students to think about the underlying factors that influence public opinion and the formation of partisanship,” he explains. To that end, he often requires students to consider their political affiliations through the lens of course readings. “I ask students to use classroom assignments to interpret how they became a Democrat or Republican,” he says. “It’s a way to relate the readings to their own backgrounds and discuss group identification.”

PERSONALIZING POLITICS
Bringing the personal side of politics into the classroom also makes sense to Bruce Newman, marketing professor in the Driehaus College of Business. Newman draws on his past experiences as a communications advisor to former President Bill Clinton’s administration, as well as the founder of the Journal of Political Marketing, to enhance his classroom teaching. “I use my background to provide examples and provoke discussion and opinion about current events,” he says.

Kurt Gonska (LAS ’09), who majored in political science and minored in marketing, intentionally sought out faculty members with real-world experience in their fields. He found that Newman’s ability to bridge the classroom and the political sphere resulted in particularly relevant assignments. “For a project on market segmentation and strategic goals, he suggested I use the 2008 presidential primary as a research subject, rather than a company, which is what the rest of the class was doing,” Gonska says.

Now part of the crisis communications team at Sunshine Sachs, a public relations firm, Gonska spent several years after college developing his own political acumen as a field organizer, finance director, district director and campaign manager for various candidates, “I enjoy helping people create the best possible environment for their work to flourish and gain the exposure it deserves,” he affirms. “Professor Newman helped me
understand the methodology and strategy behind all that.”

PREPARING THE PEOPLE

Spencer Barrett (CSH ’15) points to a journalism course on the press and the presidency as a factor in his political maturation. “I can look at elections from a more objective perspective because I understand why the news is being presented a certain way,” he explains. Professor Bruce Evensen, journalism program director and chair, says that was a key goal of his course. “How the media frames the candidates and their messaging has real importance in terms of how the voter views the political process,” he notes.

As assistant campaign director at the Fund for the Public Interest, a national nonprofit that conducts campaigns for environmental and public interest organizations, Barrett sees this tension play out every day. “It can be frustrating sometimes when I’m trying to get people involved, and it just doesn’t interest them,” he says. “I think it can be difficult for those outside this field to see the cause-and-effect patterns.” On a more positive note, Barrett doesn’t believe this lack of political interest is something that defines his generation. “Some people are really passionate about it, and others are not, and that’s just the way it is.”

For those students in between, however, it may be a DePaul course in political science, journalism or business that makes a small but significant difference in political awareness, action or interest. Evensen likes to share a historical anecdote to urge his students to take their electoral responsibilities seriously. After the 1787 Constitutional Convention, a woman approached Benjamin Franklin to find out whether the new country would be a republic or a monarchy. “You have a republic if you can keep it,” Franklin supposedly answered.

Social Media and the Presidential Election

In today’s connected world, it’s easy to voice your political stance or support a candidate with the click of a button. Freshman Jake Villont says he constantly uses social media to share pictures and posts from his favorite presidential candidate. He’s certainly not alone in his promotional efforts. A new course in the College of Communication capitalizes on the devotion of both students and candidates to Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Vine to dig into the impact of social media on the presidential election process. “I thought it might be fun and interesting for students to follow and discuss the election in real time,” says Andrew Solomon, adjunct professor and managing director of communications for the MacArthur Foundation.

Before joining the MacArthur Foundation, Solomon racked up public affairs and communications experience at Harvard University’s nonpartisan Institute of Politics, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, where he led a rebranding of the agency during former President Bill Clinton’s second term. “I’m excited to share my enthusiasm for politics and public issues with DePaul students,” he says. “I hope I can help students become more engaged and participatory citizens, as well as more effective communicators.”

In the interview that follows, Solomon discusses details of his course, The Presidential Election in Real Time, and elaborates on the importance of cultivating an engaged citizenship.

What specifically will the course cover?
The course will follow the presidential campaign in real time. Students will discuss and analyze how the campaigns use communication tools and tactics. To do this, students will follow media coverage of the race in traditional and nontraditional outlets, as well as on diverse social media platforms. We will also read background material to expand our understanding of the presidential election process and the importance of strategic communications in American politics today.

What are your objectives for the course? What do you want students to get out of it?
Students should come away with a better understanding of the presidential campaign and how to develop and provide strategic communications advice in any job. They will be better-informed citizens and, therefore, more engaged citizens and more effective communicators.

How will you engage students in the course content?
This will be a discussion-centered course, so it’s important that students plan on actively participating. We will watch, read and track coverage of the campaign in traditional news outlets and on social media. Students will write memos to the candidates offering communications analysis and advice based on what is actually happening in the race, and they will present those memos in front of the class and learn to defend their ideas. We will watch and dissect candidate ads and debates. Additionally, guest speakers will share their perspectives on communications and campaigns, as well as talk about their career paths. And we will have fun!