

## Using a Challenge and Choice Method

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Regardless of the number of students enrolled in a course, teaching basic social science should be challenging and exciting for both students and instructors. To meet this standard, I incorporate diverse methods of motivating students to employ high standards to achieve academic excellence. Whether the classes I teach are composed of thirty-five students or ninety students, I insist on challenging them, not only with regard to the American political process, but also with regard to their ideals about the manner in which government should operate. For example, after my lecture on American ideals, constitutional government and federalism, I challenge students in my American government courses to create a political system to govern them if they were stranded on an island with no chance of being rescued. Students may adopt the principles that the Founding Fathers employed when writing and ratifying the U.S. Constitution, or they may deviate from representative democracy.

Additionally, and most importantly, students are informed that my courses are structured according to "choice." I assume that each student in my course is enrolled not only to pass the course but to increase his/her knowledge base, although many take American government as a core requirement. In order to achieve these goals, students are faced with numerous choices in terms of studying and attending class, staying alert and being prepared to participate. Some students have to weigh the option of over-participating in non-academic activities versus preparing themselves for academic assignments. Nevertheless, I inform them at the start of the semester and reiterated throughout the semester, in order to make prudent choices in "real life," one must first think, weigh alternative options, and consider the consequences of the decisions that one makes and/or does not make. By making choices, one learns how to think and function independently. With such a philosophical framework guiding the thought processes of students, they should encounter few major problems comprehending the study and significance of American government and/or politics.

Inductively and within a political science context, once they have grasped the manner in which they themselves make decisions based upon circumstances and examination of possible outcomes, students should be able to develop a better grasp of how theories of early Greek philosophy influenced the Founding Fathers' thinking and creation of the American Constitution. This thought process should also make it easier for students to understand the significance of checks and balances, federalism, judicial review, the Virginia Plan versus the

New Jersey Plan, a one-person executive, the electoral college, and the U.S. emphasis on economic interdependence with Japan. Clearly, this process encourages students to learn about American politics as scholars conceptualize it and also to take into account the choices that politicians face when making decisions.

Because one of the most fundamental methods of learning is conducting research, students also have an opportunity to write and present "short" research papers about controversial political issues: in the "real" world, it is controversy that draws mass attention to politics. Moreover, this assignment is not divorced from making sound choices. Students are encouraged not only to choose topics of interest to them, but also to formulate a thesis statement via empirical research and to reach and state conclusions based upon that research. They are also required to state the implications of the conclusions that they reach. This process allows them to learn the technical aspects of writing college papers and also provides the opportunity for them to express their viewpoints regarding "real life" issues from a critical but factual standpoint. This process is implemented to ensure that students acquire a basic understanding of how to write college position papers and develop critical thinking skills. As an extra credit assignment for larger classes, they have the opportunity to present their research in class. The advantage of assigning research papers to students in large classes is that quite a few write and present on the same topics but with different perspectives. It is exciting during presentations when students challenge each other in reference to the virtues and/or vices of public policy from an intellectual viewpoint. With papers in hand, students not only learn from one another, but also discover the unanticipated consequences that public policy allows.

Who said that taking and teaching a social science course at the introductory level had to be dull? Instead of waiting until students enroll in upper-level courses, instructors should challenge them to think, research, and write at the introductory level. Students should also become acquainted with systematic consideration of alternatives when making policy or sound decisions. My students normally research, write, and present papers about affirmative action, abortion, gun control, school safety, global warming, the constitutional basis of patients' rights versus the rights of health maintenance organizations, etc., but in doing so, they are also strengthening their cognitive, analytical, organizational, research, writing, and on-line skills, that is, skills that we use throughout life. In essence, students are being challenged to pass my courses, but also to become thoughtful adults.