



## A Framework for Teaching about Political Controversies in the Trump Era

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Donald Trump's election presents challenges and opportunities for political science teachers. In any political science class, some students may be directly targeted or adversely affected by Trump administration policies, while others may be Trump supporters. Emotions may run high and discussions may be explosive, presenting tough challenges even for instructors and students used to in-class controversies. Political science teachers need a plan to respond to student differences about the Trump administration. A good plan should preserve the objectivity expected of university teachers without normalizing violations of democratic norms.

The goals and actions of the new administration also create opportunities to deepen students' understanding of policy changes and controversies – and also their appreciation for core democratic principles. Fuller understandings of the fundamentals on which democratic government rests can influence students' assessments of the actions of previous administrations as well as the tendencies of the administration of President Donald Trump.

### Defending Democratic Values in the Classroom

Moral commitments to freedom and equality for all citizens are bedrock justifications for democracy. Citizens should guide government leaders, and they in turn should be held accountable to citizens. Commitment to democratic government implies that election outcomes ought to affect policy directions. Winning parties should be able to advance their agendas.

But democracy also demands limits on the power of winners. Victors cannot properly undermine the conditions necessary for citizens to hold them accountable. They cannot legitimately restrict freedoms of speech, association, dissent, or protest, or take steps to undermine free, fair, and regular elections, judicial independence, and due process of law. In the United States, the Constitution and Bill of Rights legally entrench these basic rights and limits to government or majority power. If any U.S. presidential administration takes steps to undermine the preconditions for democratic government, teachers have reason to speak up and underline the importance of maintaining those rights and limits. In such a situation, normal classroom neutrality is not appropriate.

### Principles for Teaching about Three Kinds of Government Initiatives

Instructors should encourage students to engage with the teacher and one another in various ways – according to the kinds of issues at stake when public controversies enter the classroom.

**Ordinary policy changes within a constitutional democracy.** As is normal when a new party gains office, many Trump administration initiatives will not affect the conditions for democratic government – even though some groups may be disadvantaged if they are implemented. In the natural course of a transition of power in a democratic system, policy controversies will rage; and certain proposals could be deemed by some to be ill-informed or unjust without violating democratic norms. In classroom discussions of policy controversies of this sort, political science teachers can use controversies over policy changes to illustrate that elections have consequences.

Teachers can also discuss scientific inquiries into likely policy consequences, asserting the value of empirical evidence for policy debates. Whatever broader political and moral considerations are at stake in policymaking, the results of policies are constrained by empirical realities. As social scientists, political science teachers can properly advocate for the relevance of evidence and public decisions based on proper understanding of likely

factual consequences.

**Unconstitutional actions that undermine conditions for democratic government.** Some policies advocated by the newly installed Trump administration could undermine basic conditions for democracy. Examples are calls for political opponents or media outlets to be summarily jailed, punished, or litigated into silence. Other indications of possible illegitimate violations include requiring all members of certain groups to register with the country's security apparatus, or government infringements on academic freedom or rights to free speech, and nonviolent protest.

Such steps violate democratic limits and the U.S. Constitution. They would raise the personal, economic, and political costs of dissent, undermine the ability of citizens to hold government accountable, and erode future conditions for democratic governance. Should such actions or proposals arise, political science teachers have an obligation to condemn them, argue against them with full force of reason, and refuse to cooperate with them. Comparative political analysis has shown that concerted authoritarian government violations can quickly undermine the legal and cultural conditions for democracy, so speaking up is called for when the first signs of basic violations appear.

**Policies that may be constitutional yet weaken conditions for democracy.** Some policies proposed by President Trump, while not obviously unconstitutional, could nevertheless negatively impact the conditions for democracy. These include manipulating or seeking to control media organizations for propaganda purposes and increasing the power and jurisdiction of national security agencies to surveil Americans.

Although such efforts may not be constitutionally prohibited, they merit critical responses – and offer political science teachers and students opportunities to reflect on the differences between constitutionalism and democracy. Not all constitutional actions contribute to democratic government; sometimes they can undermine it. This possibility should provoke reflection not just on Trump initiatives but also on steps taken by previous administrations to overly expand presidential or military authority and extend the reach of government surveillance.

Although no panacea, this three-fold structure helps students develop deeper appreciation of core democratic principles – and can help teachers develop student capacities to distinguish between legitimate policy disputes and foundational transgressions. This framework encourages teachers to help students think hard about the historical and comparative bases for democracy; and it facilitates more rigorous and thoughtful policy analysis by promoting an appreciation of the distinction between facts and values. Times of political controversy can actually enliven the classroom, as long as teachers know how to handle the full range of issues that can arise.