Teaching Special Topics Courses
in Political Science

By Austin Trantham, Ph.D.

“What courses are you teaching next semester?” I find myself answering this question at least once every academic year due to an interested colleague, friend, or family member wanting to learn more about the topics I am discussing with my students.

Depending on institutional type, faculty staffing needs, and personal preferences, your answers to this question might include: (A) an introductory course taken by non-majors seeking to fulfill general education requirements, (B) upper-division courses for declared majors in a given area of expertise, or (C) a combination of these classes. However, I encourage you to consider responding in a future semester with answer (D): “A special topics course.”

Why Offer Special Topics Courses?
While in graduate school during the first months of the Obama administration, I enrolled in a topical course titled “A New Presidency and the Press.” Taught by a former White House news correspondent, the class included students with both Political Science and Communication backgrounds. Weekly discussions illustrated the intersections between the two disciplines, and this experience introduced me to the educational value of special topics classes.

Specialty courses can be academically enriching and personally rewarding for both students and faculty members. These classes allow opportunities for non-majors to gain an introduction and appreciation for a new field of study, while majors have the ability to critically examine their chosen discipline from a unique perspective. Faculty may be able to join with colleagues in other areas to team-teach a course which may lead to unforeseen publishing opportunities on mutually interesting subjects. Finally, special topics courses may allow adjunct faculty the ability to enter a classroom and impart their knowledge and experiences to students while exploring unique course material.

Personal Experiences with Special Topics Courses
This section provides an overview of two topical courses that I have taught across three institutions. Each course contains a broad overview of topical content and selected assigned readings, as well as how I promote student learning through writing assignments and active learning exercises.

Scandal and Corruption in American Politics
Many examples of political scandal and corruption exist in modern times and politicians, journalists, and academics have a vested interest in critically analyzing these events. My learning objectives in this course focus on equipping students to understand the basic theories and typologies associated with political scandal and corruption, explaining the significance of various scandals and corrupt events in American political history, and synthesizing concepts through a potential real-world scandal scenario.

Following discussions concerning theoretical concepts important to this subject such as the roles of political support and trust in government, the class engages in a historical overview of political machines in the United States. Several historical cases, including Mayor Richard Daley’s control of Chicago politics in the 1950s, allow students to understand the timeless nature of these organizations. The main text for this unit is Plunkitt of Tammany Hall (1905), a direct account of life working in the famed New York machine in the early twentieth century. In this section of the course, students are
tasked with writing a paper designing their own modern-day organization including developing a plan for gaining and maintaining trust and support among local constituents.

The course then moves to discussing consequential sexual, financial, and power-based scandals. The sexual affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky is a central subject for discussion due to its continuing relevance in the current political climate. Other sexually-based acts by former governors, senators, and representatives are addressed by readings and viewing news clips chronicling the events. To put different types of sexual incidents into comparative context, I employ William Benoit’s Theory of Image Restoration Discourse from the field of political communication as a classroom activity. This concept focuses on using rhetorical strategies to justify inappropriate conduct including denying the event, shifting the blame, or directly attacking the accuser. Students apply Benoit’s work by studying a sampling of addresses from press conferences given by those embroiled in sexual scandals and deciding the tactic employed by the politician.

The Watergate period serves as the focal point for examining political corruption amidst power scandals. The class reads Bernstein and Woodward’s All the President’s Men (1974) and watches Richard Nixon’s post-presidency interviews in 1977 with British journalist David Frost to gain a more direct understanding of the individuals and events comprising this consequential time in American political history. A subsequent topic in the course focuses on Watergate’s impact through discussion of reform efforts, including the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 which created the Office of the Independent Counsel.

One way that I evaluate student learning at the conclusion of this course is through a written Scandal Containment Plan. Students must advise a politician on how to survive an ongoing sexual, financial, or power-based scandal threatening to end their career. Beginning with an instructor-provided vignette outlining the scandal’s parameters, students must integrate aspects of course content into their action plan, including detailing how the politician will maintain public support and their response to the news media’s reporting of events. A similar type of historical scandal studied during the course must be compared and examined along with the given scenario for any lessons that could be learned from its consequences. At the end, each assignment must formally advice the politician on how to survive the scandal and remain in office. This assessment allows students to creatively demonstrate course knowledge while displaying critical thought in how they explain the ultimate decisions found in their plan.

Politics and Popular Culture
I designed this course as a way for students to better comprehend the intersections between politics and society through diverse mediums such as art, music, television, and film. The class is cross-listed to count for Political Science or Sociology credit; this allows students from both subjects to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue during the semester. Students are assigned Joseph Foy’s Homer Simpson Goes to Washington as a “textbook” of sorts, but I look to popular publications and journal articles for the bulk of required readings. Course content is divided into four sections: (1) analyzing the relationship between beliefs, attitudes, and culture emphasized by the mass media, (2) examining depictions of political institutions, (3) understanding how behavior may shape culture through studying civilian protests and social uprisings, and (4) the intersection between culture, politics, and public policy through depictions of the criminal justice system in the television show Crime Scene Investigation and the impact of Title IX within college athletics.

Throughout the course, several interactive assignments require students to analyze the central themes being considered through different media forms. When discussing political institutions, students must compare Frank Capra’s classic Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) with episodes of House of Cards (2013) on Netflix, two notable cultural depictions of Congress on film and television. Students are instructed to examine how key concepts relating to Congress including the workings of
the legislative process, political representation, and leadership roles are depicted in each program by referencing specific scenes and character dialogue as supporting evidence. This assignment allows for a critical distinction to be made between how Washington, D.C. is perceived through Hollywood writers versus the actual political processes occurring in our nation’s capital.

Teaching this course also allows me to expose students to different types of media. In an effort to enliven class sessions while providing material for discussions and exams, I play a medley of songs from various genres illustrating course topics. Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire” is used as an introduction to popular culture in political history while “Video Killed the Radio Star” by The Buggles depicts the impact of media in society. Other songs include Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” and “Where is the Love?” by the Black Eyed Peas as lyrical depictions of protest and social uprising during the Vietnam War and War on Terror. Having provided an overview of my classes, I will now offer advice to faculty new to teaching special topics courses.

Do It Yourself: Practical Advice for Designing a Special Topics Course
You have decided to offer your first specialty class in an upcoming semester. What should be kept in mind when conceptualizing and preparing the course? First, the adage of “keeping it simple” strongly applies in this case. Focus the subject of the course on content that you already know and believe is able to be packaged in a captivating way. As an example, creating a new topics course on “Comparative Executives” in a short time due to departmental need came much easier given my prior research and teaching interests on the American presidency and introductory comparative politics. Second, brainstorm a catchy title for the offering. While not required, it may help to attract students and boost enrollment. For instance, “Introduction to Political Leadership” might be reimagined as “Democrats, Dictators, and Demagogues” to make it more attractive to non-major students who might not otherwise enroll in a political science course. Finally, critically assess the amount of prior knowledge needed for the course, difficulty of readings, etc. when deciding where the new course should fall in your department’s curriculum (i.e. a freshman-level seminar or a senior-level offering). These are a few steps to consider when planning a special topics course.

Concluding Thoughts
Offering several special topics courses have proven to be rewarding aspects of my faculty career. I am currently in the preliminary stages of planning to team-teach a Political Communication course during the Fall 2020 semester with my communication colleagues. Our initial conversations have been positive, and I am excited for this new collaboration. Teaching a special topics course can be a worthwhile endeavor, allowing students to gain a new appreciation for different aspects of the political world. So, what courses are you teaching next semester?

Dr. Austin Trantham is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Jacksonville University. He teaches courses in American Politics, Comparative Politics, Research Methodology and Public Policy.