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"What ought we do?":
Rethinking How We Teach American Government Survey Courses"
(working outline)

Abstract:

In this paper I consider the purpose of the standard "Introduction to American Government" course (which students at public universities are often required, by state law, to take), and I explore how such a course might be redesigned to better respond to both the problem of civic illiteracy and the pervasive concern about waning citizenship. Based on the prominent use of textbooks in this course, the material in those textbooks, and the large size of such classes, I assert that this standard survey course traditionally focuses on teaching students basic information about American government. I argue that it ought, instead, give greater emphasis to the cultivation of those skills and character traits necessary for students to exercise citizenship. While service-learning components and internships invite such occasions, I explore how such a shift in emphasis may be obtained by recasting the study of politics as a humanistic (as opposed to social scientific) enterprise. By highlighting the question, "what should we do?" as the driving question of democratic politics, a reconceived introductory course could engage students with questions about the proper ends and means of politics through a variety of more stimulating reference materials than textbooks (historical debates, dilemmas as they're depicted in novels, current events, etc). More importantly, by reframing the classroom investigation around the question of "what should we do?" rather than around the descriptive project of the working components of American government, students are challenged to refine their critical thinking skills and engage one another in public deliberation. Drawing on Alan Wolfe's recent study, "Does American Democracy Still Work?" (Yale University Press, 2006) and his concerns about the corrupting forces of populism and moralism in public dialogues, Orwell's canonical essay, "Politics and the English Language," and on a number of suggestions offered by prominent thinkers devoted to assessing the role of the modern university in providing students with a political education (*To Restore American Democracy,* Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), I seek to detail what such a

reconceptualization of this survey course would require and to articulate how it might contribute to the project of revivifying thoughtful, not just active, citizenship.

Specifying the Challenge: How do we sustain America's *liberal* democracy?

American democracy in the 21st century is plagued by an impoverished notion of politics and the disappearance of community life. Ideological spin and intense partisanship threaten to undermine the integrity of public discourse; disillusioned and frustrated citizens are tempted to turn into apathetic voters or ardent defenders of narrow self-interest; and the aspiration to identify and serve the common good risks being discarded as a naïve aim or a deceptive pose. Similarly civic life fails to give voice to a genuine public and so fails to engage the common good. Public schools and neighborhoods are increasingly stratified along socio-economic divisions; social organizations lose members to professional associations and interest groups; volunteerism declines under the sense of powerlessness to effect change; and in our protests, rallies, blogs and chat rooms we find ourselves singing only to the choir. Under these circumstances, there are fewer and fewer occasions for individuals to think beyond material self-interest and utilitarian calculations, to step outside of their immediate concerns and to consciously reflect and deliberately direct those forces that affect their lives.

In his recent book, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* Alan Wolfe offers a wonderfully succinct but largely familiar assessment of these current trends that endanger American democracy.[1] Citizens, he observes, lack the knowledge they need in order to make well informed choices about candidates as well as issues. As the Antifederalists feared, national politics has become too complex and obscure and

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[1] Wolfe, Alan. *Does American Democracy Still Work?* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

citizens too uninvolved and apathetic. This lack of political knowledge is compounded, according to Wolfe, by a lack of accountability. Once elected, representatives have less and less incentive to serve the public good since the public, failing to follow their voting record, can neither reward nor punish the representative for his actions. Wolfe proceeds to argue that this dynamic between a lack of knowledge and a lack of accountability undermines the institutions and leadership upon which American democracy depends.[2] Mistrust, suspicion and disappointment discourage civic involvement; and the absence of such involvement creates the conditions under which power can be employed to advance ideological agendas and private interests at the expense of the public good.

Certain that the American experiment in self-government demands continual work and requires constant vigilance but also cognizant of the long tradition of assessing American democracy's demise, I appreciate Wolfe's tempered critique. He concludes that democracy has far too deep of roots to be imperiled in America. Instead, it is a particular type of democracy, liberal democracy, that seems to be precariously close to disappearing. This distinction between democracy and liberal democracy is not new; it wholly consumed Madison in his attempt to create a government powerful enough to maintain order but not so powerful that it oppresses the people.[3] But it is a distinction that often gets lost in the hullabaloo about the prevalence of civic illiteracy, the decline of volunteerism, and the rise of less than civil partisanship. Wolfe usefully moves away

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[2] Political parties increasingly serve a grand ideology rather than a specific shared ends which benefit otherwise divergent groups of people. Partisanship and party loyalty ousts political moderates; ideological certainty undermines compromise across the aisle and endangers the concept of a loyal opposition; and citizens, who are already disengaged from politics, justify their withdrawal on the grounds that those who claim to speak in their name, don't and that policies enacted to serve their interests, don't.

[3] Madison, Federalist 10.

from his initial concern about our lack of knowledge with his forceful conclusion in defense of liberal democracy. It is not so much what we don't know but rather the civic disposition we seem to failing to cultivate, that endangers the constitutional liberalism on which American democracy was founded.

Wolfe remains as tempered in his defense of liberal democracy as he is in his critique of the new politics overtaking American democracy. He concedes that liberalism, in the philosophical not ideological sense, isn't perfect. "They [liberal societies] pay relatively little attention to community, offer insufficient respect for tradition, and frequently fail to take full account of the obligations of one generation to another."[4] And yet, Wolfe insists we recognize their merits: they treat conflicts as resolvable through compromise; they employ reason to moderate politics and to contain extremism; they challenge unchecked centralization of political power in an attempt to tame public life so that private life may flourish.[5] He chastises our current public discourse for failing to recognize tolerance as one of those virtues whose absence we ought lament. He objects to the increasing connotation of politics as nothing more than warfare by other means, and he laments to disappearance of political moderates in office and on the airwaves. What American democracy requires in order to continue to work, he persuasively concludes, is a revitalization of the Enlightenment-inspired commitments to reason, impartiality and tolerance, before such civic virtues become obsolete in, not just irrelevant to, our political process.

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[4] Wolfe, 172.
[5] Wolfe, pp 171-173.

The Role of the University in Amplifying the Role of Reason, Impartiality and Tolerance in Public Discourse

The University plays a crucial role in democratic life by resisting the forces and challenging the assumptions that diminish our capacity to check centralized power, tame public life, and discipline self-interest. Its search for knowledge calls us to look beyond the boundaries of the self and to challenge the status quo through inquiry, imagination, and reasoned argument. In the course of educating its students, the University cultivates citizens with the skills and the disposition to sustain democratic discourse: the same skills required to conduct a rigorous search for the truth are used to exercise political judgment; the same analytical eye it seeks to train to equip its students to critically evaluate arguments, theories and positions can be turned to defend liberty by living deliberately. Unfortunately, to the extent the University is increasingly perceived to be a forum for white-collar job training and technical preparation for the various occupations that populate the American middle class, it risks succumbing to the very forces it's meant to help us defend against. But fortunately, this danger of impoverishing our understanding of the University's distinct mission by confusing it with the ends secured through vocational training, suggests that a focus on cultivating citizenship serves the University's own self-interest in maintaining its own distinctiveness. That is to say, the University's interest in sustaining its distinctiveness coincides with democracy's need for it to help cultivate the civic disposition necessary for liberal constitutional democracy to persevere.

The distinctive contribution the University can make to civic education has long been recognized, even though how it ought to encourage citizenship and what kind of citizenship it advances remains contested. Many state legislatures require students to complete a course in American government in order to graduate; Bloom's Closing of the American Mind argues for its aristocratic function; and affirmative action policies recognize the University's potential to advance real equal opportunity. Despite this contest over what civic values the University imparts and despite the deconstruction of philosophical liberalism's pretense to neutrality, the distinctive contribution the University alone can make to the advancement of civic education seems to rest less with imparting basic knowledge of American government to students (which seems to be the aim of most large general education American Government survey courses which employ a textbook and multiple choice exams to test students' knowledge of the basic features of American government) and more specifically teaching politics in liberal arts tradition. Recast as a study of the human condition, such a general education American government course could offer an examination of how we, as a people, have decided: what sort of society is legitimate, preferable and just; the reasons we've given to defend that vision; the institutions and processes we've designed to secure it or reform it; and the sort of people we strive to be within and against it.

I don't mean to deny the value of a descriptive survey course. I simply wish to distinguish what the University may offer distinct from primary and secondary schools, vocational schools, voluntary associations and leadership programs. The University is peculiarly instituted and equipped to contribute to the development of liberal

temperament necessary to liberal constitutionalism that grounds American democracy. Michael Walzer, in his contribution to a collection of essays on the role of the University in educating citizens, calls this contribution the development of moral reasoning.[6] In the course of encouraging critical thinking, deliberate decision making and articulate reason giving, the University ought engage students in the study of the problem of moral choice in political and professional life.[7] Admitting that the question of what moral values the University advocates remains controversial, Walzer insists that we separate the inculcation of values from the study of moral choices (just as Wolfe insists, in his defense of specifically *liberal* democracy, that its commitment to tolerance, reason and impartiality, hosts conservatives "ranging from former Senator Danforth, journalist Andrew Sullivan and columnist David Brooks."[8]). "A purely descriptive account of values won't give students any sense of what a value is or what it means to say that some principle or practice is valuable."[9] In contrast, undergraduates may more successful acquire a sense of what a value is by studying the meanings and possible applications of moral rules in the scholarly setting of argumentation which forces students to analyze historical and hypothetical cases.

I am persuaded, indeed inspired, by Walzer's challenge to replace the descriptive survey course with an ethical investigation. Disappointed with how I teaching my large section of American government every semester (with a textbook rather than with primary sources; requiring little writing and having little opportunity for sustained class

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[6] Walzer, Michael. "Moral Education and Democratic Citizenship" in To Restore American Democracy. Political Education and the Modern University. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.
[7] Walzer, pp. 217, 222.
[8] Wolfe, p 173.
[9] Walzer, p. 222.

discussion and in-depth treatment of particular arguments), I appreciate the opportunity this conference provides to imagine what such a shift to ethical investigation may look like.

"What ought we do?" Reconceptualizing Introduction to American Government as a Course in the Moral Reasoning Required of America Citizens

To shift the course from its descriptive frame with an emphasis on knowledge accumulation to a normative frame with an emphasis on engaging arguments, systematically thinking through what principles and values are at stake, and weighing the reasons and articulating one's own reasons for supporting one position or another in crucial political debates, the central question of the course seems to be "What ought we do?" Such a question directs our attention to the moral questions at heart of politics: what ends should we pursue? What are the proper and legitimate means to employ? And how do we determine who constitutes the we?

Given the course aims to advance moral reasoning in terms of American government, I imagine beginning by introducing students to the competing conceptions of government that inform the American experience. With Winthrop's City on the Hill speech we encounter the Puritanical aspiration for Christian brotherhood; with the Declaration of Independence, we engage the social contract tradition; with Paine's Common Sense, we engage the libertarian aspiration to transcend government. These three competing conceptions about the origin, purpose and nature of government provide a foundation from which to begin to evaluate what renders a government and its activities legitimate.

This discussion naturally leads to an analysis of the Federalist – Antifederalist debate. Reading The Federalist Papers, students encounter not only a description of the Constitution and its logic, but also a model of how moral judgments inform political orientations. Antifederalists like Brutus and Centinal, provide a model of articulate opposition, and analyzing this foundational debate invites students to ruminate about how we identify and prioritize the multiple ends we aim at and the various means that may be employed to secure them. Aware of the prevalent antipolitical individualism that many students have acquired, this debate could also invite reflection upon the question of what constitutes liberty: freedom from politics or freedom through self-government.

So far the material covered parallels the standard Introduction to American government. The difference would be the reading of the primary texts and the way in which we engaged them – discerning the arguments put forth and the assumptions they make and the values they advance and evaluating the merits of each case. Once students have analyzed the reasons for ratifying the Constitution and the reservations we have about it, I would introduce them to subsequent visions that past political leaders have persuaded us to share. With excerpts from the speeches and letters of Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR and Reagan, students encounter various forms of federalism, along with models of great persuasive rhetoric employing principles to argue for new applications of them. These speeches provide competing visions about the sort of nation the Constitution aims at, and the opportunity to compare and contrast how each leader discerns the

pressing danger of their day, recasts the aspirations of Constitutional government and argues for new or different powers.

Lincoln's writings invite us to pause to assess his use of religious language to advance a unifying conception of citizenship, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates, along with abolitionist writings and Calhoun's doctrine of nullification engage us in the constitutional crisis over civil rights and the demands of the principle of equality. The atrocities of slavery and the fact of the civil war confront us with the limits of reasonable disagreement and the serious challenge of balancing moral absolutism with the demands of tolerance in a liberal, pluralistic society. Alternatively, Lincoln, in conjunction with Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr. invite us to deliberate on the virtue of civil disobedience and its limits. And in other semesters, we might study civil rights through the contemporary debate of affirmative action, or through a historical study of the 1960s Civil Rights movement and the various roles played by the Courts, the legislature and public opinion.

Wanting to demonstrate to students that politics is a humanistic study, I'd want draw from different genres of writing. In addition of foundational texts, historical and contemporary debates, and presidential speeches, novels like Henry Adams' *Democracy An American Novel* or the entertaining essays of *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* provide the opportunity for students to assess the role of political parties, interest groups and patronage in political process. The television series West Wing offers episodes that depict the competing visions of government held by modern Democrats and

Republicans; the classic Mr. Smith Goes to Washington invites us to assess the location of power and institutional processes that sustain it and that may be used to challenge it. Works of fiction might enhance the course in a number of ways. First, it displays the variety of ways in which we make moral choices and attempt to justify them. Second, it demands us to sharpen interpretative skills, teasing out the implicit argument being advanced or assumed through the characters and the plot. Additionally, given the wide ranging interests and abilities of students in a general education class, an array of primary texts may serve better such wide ranging tastes and talents. Finally, the number of novels and movies that present us with the challenge of centralized power and checking it invite the course the vary each semester, according to the contemporary issues, shifting interests, and vagaries of election years.

Given the time constraints of a semester course and the breadth of material often required to be covered, I am at a loss when it comes to what primary texts might usefully engage us in moral reasoning about the institutional workings of Congress, the bureaucracy, and the Courts (the Presidency having been addressed through presidential speeches above). Court cases might be easily employed to engage students in evaluating the values that guide judges in deciding cases, while also engaging them in moral debates about how we identify and protect civil liberties. Court cases traditionally invite such a discussion, though again this course departs from the standard course insofar as it asks students to read the actually cases, and weigh the arguments made, rather than depend on a textbook description of them.

I can imagine concluding the course with Orwell's Politics and the English Language in conjunction with political writings or speeches animating current events. My hope would be to impress upon students, that though the course is concluding, the need to continue evaluating arguments – parsing meaning, assessing claims, and deliberating about moral choices and how we justify them -- remains.

Reservations and Challenges

Several obstacles exist that I struggle to envision how they might be overcome.

1. First, the large size of general education classes, at least at my home institution, hinders the intensive writing exercises and class discussion necessary to use the primary texts to advance moral reasoning. I am reluctant to ask students to write regularly if time constraints prevent me from providing them extensive feedback; similarly, I hesitate to employ a seminar format in large classes where shy students may not participate and the number of students hinders my ability to challenge or otherwise direct the rigors of their argument.
2. Institutional expectations constrain our ability to experiment with this course. In my department, all faculty are expected to cover key concepts in American government so that there is some consistency across the various sections of the course. This good intention results in a forced rush through a lot of material rather than an in-depth study of representative and canonical texts. And even if an exception were made to allow for this experiment, I am daunted by the perennial hard choices regarding which aspects of American democracy are necessary to cover each semester, and which may be omitted or added.

3. Additionally, students expect the course to be easy and may resent a more writing intensive, demanding course. Indeed, the material and the way I aspire to engage it may be too rigorous for a 100 level course. And even if it were determined that a 100 level college course ought engage primary material, I suspect many students may be in need of a tutorial, refreshing their memory of their high school civics course and so equipping the students to succeed in such a 100 level course in moral reasoning.
4. Finally, though I've aimed to include a diversity of primary sources through which to engage in moral reasoning while learning more about American government, I fear my proposal remains to theory heavy. I'd like to find a way in incorporate interpretation of art, music, and more fiction to enhance and engage not only the study of American democracy but also the advancement of liberal arts education (as general education or core curriculum courses are charged to do).