

How I teach — American politics

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UD's Kassra Oskooii, associate professor of political science and international relations, teaches Introduction to American Politics, a course often taken by first-year students.

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Prof. Kassra Oskooii engages students to think meaningfully about democracy

Editor's note: First-year students, prospective students (and some of their parents) wonder and worry how they will handle the academic transition from high school to college. In a series of stories, UDaily speaks with University of Delaware professors who teach courses commonly taken by students during their first year on campus. In this story, Associate Professor Kassra Oskooii explains how he teaches Introduction to American Politics.

If there's one word that might sum up Kassra Oskooii's Introduction to American Politics class at the University of Delaware, it's "variety."

There are large class meetings with 100-plus students in the room, small discussion sections, visual aids, a lecture style that follows an informative but entertaining script, occasional jokes, frequent debates of serious and controversial issues, small- and large-group activities, and a textbook with online quizzes that are offered in a game format.



Prof. Kassra Oskooii

And, always, plenty of back-and-forth interaction with students.

"I try to make it very clear that I want students to be engaged in the lectures, even with a large group," said Oskooii, associate professor of political science and international relations. "One of my main points is: Don't be afraid to make mistakes, don't be afraid that the question you want to ask isn't sophisticated enough. I can guarantee that if you have a question, someone else in the room also has that question.

"Ask your question, and we'll come up with the answer together."

The diversity of educational activities in the class is matched by what Oskooii said is his continual awareness of the diversity of the students themselves. When he stands in front of the room of what are mostly first-semester freshmen on the first day of class, he thinks about their diversity, not only of race, gender and ethnicity, but also of their personalities, political views and, especially, their academic backgrounds.

"Some of these students may have gone to high schools where they had political science or civics classes and learned a lot of the basic information about American politics, but others may have never had a class like that," he said. "To level the playing field, I assign a textbook

that covers the basics, but then my lectures go into more advanced topics.”

Those topics, he said, aren’t necessarily more difficult to understand, but rather delve into subjects designed to make students think and to engage their interest by relating them to political issues they already care about. In that way, Oskooii tries to avoid rehashing the basic information covered in the textbook with the kind of lecture that can leave students bored.

In addition to two lectures a week, students also attend weekly small-group discussion sessions, led by graduate student teaching assistants supervised by Oskooii. Those classes give students the opportunity, in a less formal setting, to ask questions about subject matter covered in the lectures and to take part in discussions, debates and other activities focused on additional readings that have been assigned.

The teaching assistants vary their approaches in each class meeting and report back to Oskooii if there seem to be areas in which students could benefit from clarification in the next week’s lectures.

The textbook, *We the People*, includes an interactive tool called InQuizitive (from publisher W.W. Norton and Co.) in which students complete an online quiz at the end of each chapter. The quiz is structured like a game, with students wagering points on each question. They can continue as long as needed to reach the maximum number of points, but, Oskooii is quick to point out, the fastest and most efficient way to complete the quiz is by reading the chapter carefully in the first place.

“I tell my students it’s a no-stakes activity because you don’t get penalized for wrong answers; you just have to keep wagering and answering questions until you get to 100%,” he said. “I get everyone’s final score [the total for the semester typically accounts for 15% of a student’s final grade] but I don’t pay much attention to how long it took them to get there.”

Oskooii said he sees InQuizitive as serving two important functions.

“Because it feels like playing a game, I think that makes it much more engaging for students,” he said. “And it’s my way of keeping them accountable, to be sure they’ve read the assigned chapters.”

His lectures then go beyond that material, often ranging from the historical beginnings of American democracy to some of the political issues in today’s headlines. Students come to UD with a variety of experiences and philosophies, and Oskooii said he always reminds them of the importance of listening to other points of view.

“As Americans, we love democracy, but we don’t always love its consequences,” he said. “We make this assumption that everybody agrees with us, but they don’t. There’s going to be conflict and compromise. That’s built into the democratic system.”

But conflict doesn't have to mean incivility, he tells his students. And thinking critically about issues doesn't make a person unpatriotic.

"What I'd most like my students to take away from the class is the importance of being able to communicate, especially with people who disagree with you," he said. "If you care about America, about making your community better, then you have to work with others and learn to compromise. That's what democracy is about."